IN ABSALOM AND ACHITOPHEL, Dryden created the last traditional verse epic of any merit written in the English language. By the strictest canons of neoclassical criticism, it must be considered an epic poem — or, making allowance for its brevity, an epyllion. Dryden labels it Absalom and Achitophel: A Poem in the same succint fashion in which Milton called his work Paradise Lost: A Poem in Twelve Books. Indeed, Dryden’s poem much more closely approximates contemporary notions of epic than does Milton’s. It is tightly organized around a single great end, presented under the guise of historical truth; Le Bossu’s definition of epic fits it exactly:

The Epopea is a Discourse invented by Art, to form the Manners by such Instructions as are disguis’d under the Allegories of some one important Action, which is related in Verse, after a probable, diverting, and surprising Manner.¹

Generic definitions of this sort have no intrinsic importance; their value lies rather in what the properly identified particular example can tell us about the development of the form, and Dryden’s poem, both in its excellences and in its limitations, provides a great deal of information about the crisis of epic poetry at this time. Paradise Lost had already contained the germ of serious mock epic (as opposed to epic burlesque) in the parodic relation in which Satan stands to God: in particular, his fraudulent self-examinations and false or mistaken recognitions of his “mission” offer the base on which Dryden builds the shaky edifice of
Absalom's self-created mission, to establish the "dominion of grace" that grotesquely and profoundly parodies David's merciful rule. From this to the full-blown inversions of Pope's *Dunciad* is a short step ideologically but a great one literarily and culturally. Before we get there, we will have to examine in some detail exactly what Dryden accomplishes in *Absalom and Achitophel*.

I

With very few exceptions, *Absalom and Achitophel* maintains a narrative integrity that few political allegories ever reach; its fable (in our terms, its vehicle) achieves a kind of autonomy that renders it complete and satisfying in itself and perfectly transparent as a vehicle for other things. These very qualities hide the real achievement of the fable of *Absalom and Achitophel* by cloaking it with an inevitability that it by no means possesses. We are sufficiently aware of the frequency with which seventeenth-century political writers compared Charles to David to accept without demur the appropriateness of the biblical tale to the English situation. If we remember piously that Dryden has really reversed the roles of the biblical Absalom and Achitophel, the fact does little to alter our acceptance of Dryden's fable as *donnée* rather than *aperçu*, semi-fact rather than full-fiction. Yet the imaginative reordering of history, both Jewish and English, constitutes the excellence of Dryden's poem, and the "fabulous" (in the root sense) nature of Dryden's narrative makes it so inevitable a vehicle of his meaning.

In general terms, the most significant change Dryden has made in the biblical narrative lies in his radical transformation of its temporal and conceptual contexts, both of which he wrenches into a rich ambiguity. To clarify this, we shall have to examine the much-worked-over opening lines of the poem:

> In pious times, e'r Priest-craft did begin,
> Before *Polygamy* was made a sin;
> When man, on many, multiply'd his kind,
> E'r one to one was, cursedly, confind:
When Nature prompted, and no law deny'd
Promiscuous use of Concubine and Bride;
Then, Israel's Monarch, after Heaven's own heart,
His vigorous warmth did, variously, impart
To Wives and Slaves: And, wide as his Command,
Scatter'd his Maker's Image through the Land.

Let us put aside at the outset the idea that this passage serves only as a witty justification for, or palliation of, Charles's promiscuity; that is certainly true, but I doubt that Dryden needed ten lines for only that. The passage establishes an explicit temporal and conceptual context for the whole poem, a context that the remainder of the poem will treat with the same irony and ambiguity that Dryden provides for the biblical narrative on which the poem as a whole is based. "Pious times, e'r Priest-craft did begin" were technically the patriarchal period before the establishing of the Levitical priesthood, the period between God's covenant with Abraham and the more explicitly codified covenant established with the people of Israel through Moses. Obviously, chronological difficulties present themselves from the beginning: the biblical David did not live in those pious times, and Dryden's "Before Polygamy was made a sin" ignores the pointed injunction of Deuteronomy 17:17 that kings should not multiply horses, wives, or concubines. Indeed, before the end of this same first verse paragraph Dryden also indicates that priestcraft of some sort already had begun:

Gods they had tri'd of every shape and size
That God-smiths could produce, or Priests devise

Later sections of the poem of course confirm this fact:

This set the Heathen Priesthood in a flame,
For Priests of all Religions are the same
The solution to these apparent contradictions can be found in careful consideration of the first lines of the poem. Pious times contrast with those after priesthood began. Priesthood itself Dryden associates with the institution of law and consequently of sin: polygamy is made a sin; man is cursedly (the word has links with the Fall that we cannot now discuss) confined; laws deny nature’s promptings. The conception of law herein contained, particularly the conception of the law of Moses, would have been quite familiar to Dryden’s audience, since it is Saint Paul’s conception of the nature and function of the Mosaic law as he lengthily argues it in the Epistle to the Romans. Here is a brief extract of his argument:

What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead. For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. (7:7–9)

Dryden’s appropriation of this conception at the beginning of his poem forces a revaluation, a relocation of the conceptual context in which we understand David. By placing him rightly in “pious times,” Dryden leads us to see him as sharing the same sort of direct relationship to God as the patriarchs and Moses possessed; the language of the opening lines, with their emphasis on David as the monarch “after Heaven’s own heart” (7), reinforces this. In fact, Dryden depicts David’s sexuality as analogous to God’s own creativity: it is his maker’s image, not his own, that he scatters through the land.³ Dryden here exploits a distinction familiar to his
readers as the difference between the dominion of law, as exemplified by the Mosaic code, and the dominion of grace, as established by the crucifixion of Christ. The pivotal point that allows him to turn this neat inversion is the traditional conception of David as a type of Christ, a conception that Achitophel recalls for us at a crucial point in the poem (line 416; cf. John 11:60) and that Dryden obviously exploits as a careful counterpoint to the dominion of grace his conspirators and Levites — and English puritans — hope to attain. David lives under the dominion of grace, in a kind of golden world where what nature prompts is after God's own heart: he embodies the conception of the divinely appointed king to whom law is irrelevant, who founds his dominion in God's will, in grace, and in his literal and metaphoric paternity of his people. David's own comments, at the end of the poem, make quite explicit this dichotomy between the dominion of law and the dominion of grace, and argue moreover that in rejecting him his rebels reject grace itself and demand the rigor of the law — which as Saint Paul says, is death.

Law they require, let Law then shew her Face;  
They could not be content to look on Grace,  
Her hinder parts, but with a daring Eye  
To tempt the terror of her Front, and Dye.

(1006–9)

And these lines also complete the conception of David as a patriarchal king possessing direct access to the Deity by their overt allusion to Moses' vision of the hinder parts of God, whose face no man can look upon and live (Exodus 33:18–23).

Into this context Dryden has fitted the action of Absalom and Achitophel. All of his rebels oppose not just kingship but grace; monarchy and divinity are at least parallel and probably interchangeable terms. "No King could govern, nor no God could please" (48) the Jews; they are called "a Headstrong, Moody, Murmuring race" who try, not the limits of law, but "th' extent and stretch of grace" (45–46). David becomes in their minds "An Idoll Monarch which their hands had made" (64), and they think to "melt him to that Golden Calf, a State" (66). Achitophel's
temptation of Absalom adopts the form of the satanic temptation of Christ because it is simultaneously a temptation from grace, from filial devotion, and from political loyalty. But Achitophel and the other rebels do not reject the grounds of David's authority; rather, they seek to imitate them. Achitophel thus tempts Absalom to accept the role of Messiah, to falsely assume the guise of a bringer of the new and full dispensation of grace. The "Hot Levites" who head the "Solymaean Rout" parody exactly the basis of David's reign:

Hot Levites Headed these; who pul'd before
From th'Ark, which in the Judges days they bore,
Resum'd their Cant, and with a Zealous Cry,
Pursu'd their old belov'd Theocracy.
Where Sanhedrin and Priest inslav'd the Nation,
And justifi'd their Spoils by Inspiration;
For who so fit for Reign as Aaron's Race,
If once Dominion they could found in Grace?

(519-26)

Shimei, "who Heavens Annointed dar'd to Curse" (583), grotesquely parodies Christ's promise of abiding grace:

When two or three were gather'd to declaim
Against the Monarch of Jerusalem,
Shimei was always in the midst of them.

(601-6; cf. Matthew 18:20)

Corah, too, among all his other accomplishments, manages a travesty of Christ: Dryden applies to him the imagery of the brazen serpent set up in the desert to preserve the Israelites (633-35) — the image, of course, was traditionally accepted as a type of the crucifixion of Christ. All of these distortions of the true reign of grace simply repeat in David's kingdom the same sort of satanic parody of God's dominion that Milton described in *Paradise Lost*; the devil's party constantly tries to reproduce God's power, and constantly lapses into vulgar burlesque. This is the essential basis of serious mock epic; Satan is the paradigm mock-epic hero. *Paradise Lost* already contains the seeds of mock epic; the
triumph of "Satan's party" on earth provided the soil for their germination, as we will see when we come to discuss MacFlecknoe.

Within the overall framework of the dichotomy between the dominion of law and the dominion of grace, the opening lines of the poem establish a subsidiary dialectic of grace, law, and nature. Nature prompts, and no law denies "Promiscuous use of Concubine and Bride" (5–6). While in Absalom alone "'twas Natural to please" (28), still "His motions" were "all accompanied with grace; / And Paradise was open'd in his face" (29–30). And the Jews, though minimally bound by law, still "led their wild desires to Woods and Caves, / And thought that all but Savages were Slaves" (55–56). This threefold battery of themes, grace, law, and nature, governs the ideological progression of the poem: "Religion, Common-wealth, and Liberty" (292) form, as Achitophel says, the general cry.

This dialectic operates in the poem in curious and often paradoxical ways. For David, to follow nature is to follow grace; at nature's prompting he scatters his maker's image through the land. His "native mercy" (939) Absalom admits is "God's beloved Attribute" (328). Yet even for him conflict occurs, especially when law and justice enter the case:

If my young Samson will pretend a Call  
To shake the Column, let him share the Fall:  
But oh that yet he would repent and live!  
How easie 'tis for Parents to forgive!  
With how few Tears a Pardon might be won  
From Nature, pleading for a Darling Son!

(955–60)

Dryden presents David as torn between two natures, between the king's two bodies, if you will:5 as man, he grieves for his wayward son; as king, he punishes his wayward subject. The beginning of the poem schematized this paradox of kingship brilliantly. Initially, "Godlike David" (14), prompted by nature, scattered his maker's image through the land. The lines immediately following transform the procreative process from the semi-divine imparting of warmth it had been to a more earthy and natural — in a lesser sense — husbandry through an extended farming-seed metaphor. At the end of this, Dryden for the first time
introduces Absalom and offers the following rationale for his physical beauty:

Whether, inspir’d by some diviner Lust,
His Father got him with a greater Gust;
Or that his Conscious destiny made way
By manly beauty to Imperiall sway.

(19–22)

The contrast between Absalom’s “manly beauty” and David’s eminence as “Israel’s Monarch, after Heaven’s own heart” (7) explains itself, while the concise oxymoron “diviner Lust” sums up both David’s dilemma and what is wrong with Absalom’s conception. Dryden then makes of Absalom a baser — a more natural — version of David; he too follows nature, and his motions are “all accompanied with grace” (29), but what David and the reader see in him is not his maker’s image, but rather

With secret joy, indulgent David view’d
His Youthfull Image in his Son renew’d

(31–32)

Absalom bears the image of David as man, not of David as king; he is, as was the Duke of Monmouth, a natural son, an illegitimate — one born according to the order of nature rather than the order of law or grace. Dryden needs nowhere to stress either the irony of the unnatural conduct of this natural son or the paradox that the illegitimate should call for law.

Flawed human nature, as epitomized in the poem by Absalom, provides the possibility for the disruption of the dominion of grace in David’s kingdom, just as it did in the garden:

But, when to Sin our byast Nature leans,
The carefull Devil is still at hand with means;
And providently Pimps for ill desires.

(79–81)

The brief paradox of the devil’s providential pimping reminds us of the
overarching dominion of divine law and grace within which human nature acts out its "ill desires"; it recalls an ultimate law, nature, and grace that are not in conflict but are in fact identical — but in the world of fallen nature, these are only hints. More immediately apparent in this world is the "natural Instinct" by which the Jews every twenty years rebel (218–19). Achitophel appeals shrewdly to this baser nature when he urges Absalom to set aside filial regard for David—

Nor let his Love Enchant your generous Mind;  
'Tis Natures trick to Propagate her Kind.  
Our fond Begetters, who woud never dye,  
Love but themselves in their Posterity.

(423–26)

And again when he urges him to open rebellion:

Resolve on Death, or Conquest by the Sword.  
Which for no less a Stake than Life, you Draw;  
And Self-defence is Natures Eldest Law.

(456–58)

And I presume Dryden refers ironically to this same nature when he ends Achitophel's speech with "He said, And this Advice above the rest, / With Absalom's Mild nature suited best" (477–78). Yet even within this generally sinful context paradox occurs, and this same "byast Nature" also works to ironic good among the poem's villains:

But far more numerous was the herd of such,  
Who think too little, and who talk too much.  
These, out of meer instinct, they knew not why,  
Ador'd their fathers God, and Property:  
And, by the same blind benefit of Fate,  
The Devil and the Jebusite did hate:  
Born to be sav'd, even in their own despight;  
Because they could not help believing right.

(532–40)
Dryden focuses all of these paradoxes in his disquisition on the social contract, where he raises a whole series of questions about the nature of governor and governed and the scope of law (753–810). Men are naturally prone to rebellion against both kings and god; but isn't something to be said for their natural rights, “their Native sway” (760)? May kings abrogate law? If not, are kings only trustees? If so, how can any man claim any natural right other than what can be defended by brute power? The result of such a process must be a Hobbesian state of nature “where all have Right to all” (794), and that is anarchy. Alteration of existing social structures always ends that way:

To change Foundations, cast the Frame anew,  
Is work for Rebels who base Ends pursue:  
At once Divine and Humane Laws control;  
And mend the Parts by ruine of the Whole.  

(805–8)

Dryden has carefully suppressed overt mention of grace from this argument to present fully the dilemma into which unaided nature and merely human law lead; as Dryden argues it, the political problem of the one and the many is unresolvable in human terms.

The poem, however, does offer a solution to this problem in terms of its major metaphor. *Absalom and Achitophel* contains an image cluster that sums up fully all the ramifications of this dialectic of grace, law, and nature: the relations of fathers and sons operate simultaneously in all three categories, and the images of fathers and sons, the metaphors of paternity and sonship, offer the key to the totality of the poem. The poem specifically labels kings as “the Godheads Images” (792) and consistently describes David in particular as “Godlike.” The beginning of the poem explicitly links David and God through David’s sexual potency: the “vigor of warmth” he indiscriminately imparts makes him the sun of the human world, analogous to the creative warmth of the sun in the physical universe and the overflowing being of God in the metaphysical. David the King and God the Father stand in almost one-to-one relation to each other, and this analogous relationship provides the resolution of the
problem of government. Dryden signals us that this is the case when, near the beginning of his discussion of the problem of government, he makes choosing heirs for monarchs and decreeing for God parallel and almost cognate acts (758). He undercuts his own question about the contractual nature of kingship by referring to it as a “resuming Cov’nant” (767), and so linking it with God’s covenant with the Israelites and implying the consequent parallel between God’s dominion and the king’s — and since the poem has argued from the very beginning that David’s kingship constitutes the dominion of grace, this necessarily implies also that David’s authority is as irrevocable as God’s. Dryden clinches his argument by appeal to Adam’s sin, a stock argument of the theorists of patriarchal government:

If those who gave the Scepter, could not tye  
By their own deed their own Posterity,  
How then could Adam bind his future Race?  
How could his forfeit on mankind take place?  
Or how could heavenly Justice damn us all,  
Who nere consented to our Fathers fall?  

(769–74)

Dryden’s rhetorical questions amalgamate all three areas of the poem’s dialectic and convict the rebels of the heresy of challenging divine justice. Adam’s simple status as the natural father of the human race nullifies all questions of the people’s “Native sway” (760): they have none, since it was all vested in him as the father of human nature. His rebellion against the kingship of God is symbolically reenacted in the poem in the temptation and fall of Absalom, an act that, like Adam’s, will once again bring mankind under the dominion of law and death until the second Adam can restore the dominion of grace. David thus stands in the poem as God’s vice-regent, king by divine right and patriarchal descent — a fact even Achitophel admits in his sneering reference to David’s “Successive Title, Long, and Dark, / Drawn from the Mouldy Rolls of Noah’s Ark” (301–2). Dryden’s whole argument throughout this section of the poem draws heavily upon the patriarchal theorists and constantly
employs their language. He states the basic problem in terms of the rights of fathers and sons:

What shall we think! can People give away
Both for themselves and Sons, their Native sway?

(759-60)

And his citation of Adam uses the same terms of reference — tying posterity, binding one's future race, consenting to our father's fall (769-74). His subsequent critique of the problem of individual rights in a democracy follows quite closely the arguments of Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* and other similar tracts. His implicit conclusion is inescapable: David exercises authority just as does a father in his family or God in the universe. Rebellion against him equals apostacy from God — setting up the golden calf of a state (66). Logically then, when “Godlike David” speaks at the end of the poem, “His Train their Maker in their Master hear” (938); and the paternal, creative David of the opening lines brings forth one more image of his maker in the land. And equally logically, the final lines of the poem harmonize grace, law, and nature in the restoration of “Godlike David” as “Lawfull Lord” presiding over “a Series of new time” (1026-31); Dryden alludes to Virgil's supposedly messianic eclogue, with its promise of the birth of the wonder child, the restoration of a golden world, and the reestablishment of the reign of justice and grace. The end of the poem fulfills its beginning; David's kingship and paternity are transformed into symbols of the reestablishment of universal order and the undoing of Adam's fall. The paradise that was metaphorically opened in Absalom's face (30) reaches its fulfillment in the advent of the second Adam who is to be born of David's line; the dominion of grace his rebels mistakenly seek through the son of his mortal body will be established by the son of his divine body.

Given the paramount importance of the idea of paternity in this scheme, the sort of son produced becomes a major index of the rightness or wrongness, the morality or immorality, of the father and his activities. The poem juxtaposes and contrasts the sons of its various actors for the purpose of illustrating the presence of proper hierarchical order or the
absence of it. The comely Absalom, ambiguously graceful, starkly contrasts with the ugly, unformed progeny of Achitophel, the physical image of his father’s mind.

. . . that unfeather’d, two Leg’d thing, a Son:
Got, while his Soul did hudled Notions try;
And born a shapeless Lump, like Anarchy.

(170–72)

Immediately after presenting the essentially patriarchal argument about government that we have already discussed, Dryden illustrates it by his encomium of Barzillai’s son, who fulfilled all parts of the parallel duties “of Subject and of Son” (836). Such acceptance and fulfillment of the obligations of a hierarchical and patriarchal state produce another, metaphoric, image of the maker:

Oh Narrow Circle, but of Pow’r Divine,
Scanted in Space, but perfect in thy Line!

(838–39)

This encomium of Barzillai’s son thus forms an integral unit in the poem’s imagistic structure, point by point damning Absalom for his dereliction of the duties “of Subject and of Son.” David himself places this image in its most important perspective when he refers to his rebellious subjects as Jacob and Esau:

True, they petition me t’approve their Choise,
But Esau’s Hands suite ill with Jacob’s Voice.

(981–82)

Jacob, the younger son and inferior by the order of nature, achieved priority according to the order of grace; as Bishop Hall expressed it, “Esau got the right of nature, Jacob of grace.” These two sons, contending for a paternal blessing, sum up the image of sonship in the poem: nature and grace struggle for dominion, nature with Esau’s hands, simple power and bodily strength, grace with Jacob’s voice, reason and prayer.
Dryden characterizes all of the poem's Esaus by marked physical
descriptions; this process makes them primarily corporeal, while leaving
the poem's Jacobs relatively untouched by the taint of fallen bodily
nature. *Absalom and Achitophel*’s villains exist in our imaginations
primarily as physical entities — “that unfeather’d, two Leg’d thing,”
Achitophel’s son (170); Achitophel himself,

A fiery Soul, which working out its way,
Fretted the Pigmy Body to decay:  
And o’r informed the Tenement of Clay;  

(156–58)

Corah,

Sunk were his Eyes, his Voyce was harsh and loud,
Sure signs he neither Cholerick was, nor Proud:  
His long Chin prov’d his Wit; his Saintlike Grace  
A Church Vermilion, and a Moses’s Face;  

(646–49)

and even “The well hung *Balaam*”(574). Corporeal imagery marks all
the rebels and their activities, dragging them down from the realm of
spirit they would usurp to the world of matter, much as Satan’s rebellion
in *Paradise Lost* degraded him to the material form of the serpent.
Images of eating and of food particularly abound in the poem, frequently
in semi blasphemous contexts. Jewish rabbis and Jebusites agree that it
is their duty “T’espouse his Cause by whom they eat and drink” (107).
The plot itself is “swallow’d in the Mass, unchew’d and Crude” (113).
Dryden describes the beliefs of the Jebusites as follows:

Th’Egyptian Rites the Jebusites imbrac’d;
Where Gods were recommended by their Tast.  
Such savory Deities must needs be good,  
As serv’d at once for Worship and for Food.  

(118–21)
Nadab, in addition to canting, "made new porridge for the Paschal Lamb" (576). Dryden even uses such imagery negatively, and paradoxically corporealizes even his most abstemious villain, Shimei:

And, that his noble Stile he might refine,
No Rechabite more shund the fumes of Wine.
Chast were his Cellars, and his Shrieval Board
The Grossness of a City Feast abhor'd:
His Cooks, with long disuse, their Trade forgot;
Cool was his Kitchen, tho his Brains were hot.

(616–21)

This whole image pattern culminates in Absalom's offering himself to the mob:

Th'admiring Croud are dazled with surprise,
And on his goodly person feed their eyes.

(686–87)

Naturally enough, Dryden also metamorphoses his speech into one more meal: his words are "More slow than Hybla drops, and far more sweet" (697). But the final transformation of the image, and its ideological climax in the poem, occur in David's speech: the process of corporealization to which the rebels have all been subjected here reaches its nadir in a symbolic cannibalism:

Against themselves their Witnesses will Swear,
Till Viper-like their Mother Plot they tear:
And suck for Nutriment that bloody gore
Which was their Principle of Life before.

(1012–15)

Dryden binds his rebels together with still other material links; an ubiquitous pattern of references to blood, humors, lakes, and seas ties leaders and mob together in a common allegiance to the moon, which governs the motions of all such changeable bodies.
For, govern'd by the Moon, the giddy Jews
Tread the same track when she the Prime renews:
And once in twenty Years, their Scribes Record,
By natural Instinct they change their Lord.

(216–19)

Zimri, “in the course of one revolving Moon, / Was Chymist, Fidler, States-Man, and Buffoon” (549–50). Sanhedrins and crowds are “Infected with this publick Lunacy” (788); both lack stability: they flow to the mark and run faster out (786). Achitophel hopes that David’s power, “thus ebbing out, might be / Drawn to the dregs of a Democracy” (226–27). But the most important use of the image occurs quite early in the poem; it links Absalom even then with the fickle mob and sets up a loose parallel between his warm excess in murdering Amnon and the people’s feverish propensity to rebellion. Absalom’s “warm excesses” (37), Dryden tells us, “Were constru’d Youth that purg’d by boyling o’r” (38). He shortly after employs the analogy of the human body and the body politic to apply this same image, in much greater detail, to the consequences of the Popish Plot in the mob:

This Plot. which fail’d for want of common Sense.
Had yet a deep and dangerous Consequence:
For. as when raging Fevers boyl the Blood.
The standing Lake soon floats into a Flood;
And every hostile Humour. which before
 Slept quite in its Channels. bubbles o’r:
So. several Factions from this first Ferment,
Work up to Foam. and threat the Government.

(134–41)

This last use of the image once again forces a more serious revaluation of Absalom’s excesses. and at the same time degrades him by linking him with the mob in a common subservience to passion and irrationality. to the lowest common denominators of human nature. All of these images of food. eating. and humors achieve a common effect in the poem: they constitute the symbolic enactment. in the moral and individual realm. of
the public rebellion. They debase the image of his maker that David bears by reducing that image in the individual and in society to a mere physical effigy — they are, if you will, simply other versions of the golden calf to which the rebels would reduce David and God.

II

As opposed to the striking corporeality of the rebels, David and his party seem somewhat ethereal. Dryden employs no physical description whatever in his catalogue of the royalists, and his opening encomium of Barzillai's sainted and angelic son casts a protective cloak of spirituality and immateriality over all the members of the group. Indeed, Dryden does not even have the royalists do very much; in contrast to the rebels, who slide, rush, ebb, flow, and so on, the royalists merely stand and speak — thereby making a minor but effective imagistic point about stability and motion that David capitalizes upon in the very final lines of his speech (1018–25). But speech itself figures as the most important attribute of David's followers — honest speech as opposed to Achitophel's lies, rational argument as opposed to the rebels' propaganda, poetry as opposed to the fictions of Corah, Jacob's voice versus Esau's hands. The rebels curse and cant; the heroes pray and reason. This whole final section of the poem, from line 811 to the end, centers itself upon the right use of language as a criterion of loyalty, intelligence, and morality. The poem climaxes in David's speech precisely because only the enunciation of clear truth can conclude such a parade of lies and misrepresentations as the rebels have enacted. In a precisely parallel way, Dryden at this point in the poem begins emphasizing the fictive and artificial nature of Absalom and Achitophel itself, reminding us that it is a poem and exploiting the paradox of discovering truth through falsehood and fiction. The personality of the poet, as a kind of magical recorder of praise or blame for all future time, appears at the very beginning of this section; speaking of David's friends, Dryden says
20  *Epic to Novel*

Yet some there were, ev'n in the worst of days,
Some let me name, and Naming is to praise.

(815–16)

He sustains this emphasis on the personal role of the poet and his personal involvement in his fiction all through the section on Barzillai and Barzillai's son:

His Edlest Hope, with every Grace adorn'd,
By me (so Heav'n will have it) always Mourn'd,
And always honour'd . . .

(831–33)

The apostrophe to the dead hero, beginning at line 838 with "Oh Narrow Circle" continues this tone, allowing us to hear the narrator's personal grief paradoxically set within the artificial framework of formal eulogy — a point reinforced by the poet's address to his muse and reference to what he has just spoken as "this Verse / To hang on her departed Patron's Hearse" (858–59). Barzillai himself Dryden praises for his discrimination and generosity in honoring "The Fighting Warriour, and Recording Muse" (828). He similarly commends "Him of the Western dome" for sense and eloquence (868–69), and pointedly adds the following:

The Prophets Sons by such example led,
To Learning and to Loyalty were bred:
For Colleges on bounteous Kings depend,
And never Rebell was to Arts a friend.

(1870–73)

Dryden likewise distinguishes Adriel as "the Muses friend, / Himself a Muse" (877–78). He lauds Jotham for his ability "To move Assemblies" (884) and Amiel for his skill in leading the Sanhedrin —

So dexterous was he in the Crown's defence,
So form'd to speak a Loyal Nation's Sense,
That as their band was Israel's Tribes in small,
So fit was he to represent them all.

(904–7)

Dryden's long satiric portrait of Corah offers the best perspective from which to view this concern with language, since Corah commits the poem's greatest perversion of words. Dryden contrasts him tellingly with Saint Stephen, who bore witness to the truth with his life; the bilingual pun on martyr and witness enables him somewhat less than covertly to warn Corah of the fate that awaits him:

Who ever ask'd the Witnesses high race,
Whose Oath with Martyrdom did Stephen grace?

(642–43)

And again, later in the passage:

Let Israel's foes suspect his heav'nly call,
And rashly judge his Writ Apocryphal;
Our Laws for such affronts have forfeits made:
He takes his life, who takes away his trade.

(664–67)

But other aspects of Stephen's story serve Dryden's purposes as well; certainly the fact that the protomartyr was brought to trial in the first place by the suborned testimony of false witnesses bears heavily on Dryden's irony here. In another way, too, Stephen provides a norm against which to judge Corah: he enjoys a vision of Christ in glory (Acts 7:55–56) that Corah's lies grossly parody —

Some future Truths are mingled in his Book;
But, where the witness faild, the Prophet Spoke:
Some things like Visionary flights appear;
The Spirit caught him up, the Lord knows where.
Dryden’s mention of Corah’s “Moses’s Face” (649) and Stephen’s actual citation of Moses in his defense provide further clues to the significance of this passage. Stephen described Moses as a precursor of Christ, and as such he has already appeared in Absalom and Achitophel; Achitophel initially hailed Absalom as the Jews’ “second Moses, whose extended Wand / Divides the Seas, and shews the promis’d Land” (234–35). Moses as the leader of the exodus from Egypt has of course been subliminally present in the poem from the first mention of the golden calf in line 66, or perhaps even from the first line of the poem, with its implicit reference to the founding of the Levitical priesthood under Moses’ direction. However that may be, the figure of Moses as a divinely appointed ruler having direct access to the Deity has operated up to this point in the poem as a minor analogue to David. Here Dryden chooses to make this analogue explicit and important. The final lines of the passage on Shimei, which immediately precede the portrait of Corah, start the process in motion:

And Moses’s Laws he held in more account,  
For forty days of Fasting in the Mount.  
(628–29)

The fact of God’s dispensing law to the Israelites obviously has in itself considerable importance to Absalom and Achitophel, but I want to concentrate for the moment upon the idea of Moses’ vision of God on the mount, since Corah bears a parodic version of the outward effects of that vision in his “Moses’s Face”:

And it came to pass, when Moses came down from mount Sinai with the two tables of testimony in Moses’ hand, when he came down from the mount, that Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone while he talked with him. (Exodus 34:29)

Corah too has his visions, but they sound oddly more like Saint Paul’s than Moses’: “The Spirit caught him up, the Lord knows where” (657). The line recalls Paul’s famous account in 2 Corinthians:
I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one was caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man (whether in the body or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. (12:2-4)

And there, I think we have the crux of the matter: he “heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.” Corah debases that vision with his imaginary plots and malicious lies; he perjures himself, quite literally speaking “words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.” Dryden’s description of him as the brazen serpent raised in the desert continues and completes the travesty: Corah, like Absalom, plays false prophet, false Moses, false Messiah. He leads not to the dominion of grace that the brazen serpent tokens but only to the same sort of parody of it that Absalom and Achitophel offer, and ultimately to the oblivion from which he rose. Corah, as a “Levite” and one of “Godalmightys Gentle­men” (644–45), pursues what Dryden has earlier described as “their old belov’d Theocracy” (552),

Where Sanhedrin and Priest inslav’d the Nation,
And justifi’d their Spoils by Inspiration;
For who so fit for Reign as Aaron’s Race,
If once Dominion they could found in Grace?

(523–26)

The parody is perfect and complete, for the biblical Corah — also a Levite — rebelled against Moses for precisely the same reasons:

And they gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron, and said unto them, Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them: wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the congregation of the Lord? (Numbers 16:3)
Needless to say, the predictive value of historical allusion would once again warn this Corah about the exemplary punishments God visits upon those who challenge his appointed rulers, even in the name of grace.

Dryden draws Corah as a total hypocrite, one who perverts the offices of priest, prophet, and witness to his own ends by base lies. His first couplet of direct address to Corah

Yet, Corah, thou shalt from Oblivion pass;  
Erect thy self thou Monumental Brass

(632–33)

seems to me to recall the famous opening of the last ode of Horace’s third book, “Exegi monumentum aere perennius,” “I have built a monument more lasting than brass.” The conception of Corah as anti-poet, as one who uses language to deceive and disorder, contrasts coherently in the poem with the emphasis Dryden will later place, and which we have already partially discussed, upon himself as poet: opposed to Corah stands, as loyal member of the king’s party, the king’s poet laureate (more accurately, and more to the point, the historiographer royal), who employs words to impose order, who uses fictions only for their inherent truth. Corah’s lies constitute another debased image of the maker; Dryden, as a lesser maker in his own right, creates a true image of reality.

So too does David, when he promises the speedy advent of law:

Law they require, let Law then shew her Face;  
They could not be content to look on Grace  
Her hinder parts, but with a daring Eye  
To tempt the terror of her Front, and Dye.  
By their own arts ’tis Righteously decreed,  
Those dire Artificers of Death shall bleed.  
Against themselves their Witnesses will Swear  
Till Viper-like their Mother Plot they tear:  
And suck for Nutriment that bloody gore  
Which was their Principle of Life before.

(1006–15)
His reference to the hinder parts of grace returns us to Moses' vision on the mount of the glory of God; now David, like Moses, acts as the bringer of divine law to men who have fallen from grace to depraved nature. In "Viper-like their Mother Plot they tear" we see the inevitable end to which unaided nature leads, as well as the end of that part of the paternal and filial images of the poem: nature can only turn upon itself; it can never rise above itself to law or grace, both of which are the free dispensations of God and his anointed kings. But the reference to the hinder parts of grace implies more than this. If David is now functioning properly as an intermediary between God and man, as the second Moses Achitophel claimed Absalom to be, then he is not merely imposing law upon his unruly subjects but offering them access to grace as well — that is, at the very moment when the operations of grace seem about to be suspended in the face of the "curst Effects of necessary Law" (1003), God and David paradoxically offer fresh gifts of grace. David stands as a hinge between the two great dispensations, that of law in Moses and that of grace in Christ. The dominion of law contains, in embryo, the dominion of grace. What Moses saw on the mount when he viewed the hinder parts of God most biblical commentators of Dryden's time agreed upon: he saw an image of the glory of God — the Shechinah some called it, others the Word, others Christ. But it amounts to the same thing: at the moment of receiving the law, which brings death, Moses received a vision of the grace that brings life and of which he himself served as a type. That image of God's glory that he saw David here reproduces in himself and in his speech, using words as the agent of the divine will to create an image of the divine justice and mercy, just as the poet Dryden employs words to create yet another image of divine providence and just as the divine Word himself is that justice and mercy. And God himself guarantees the veracity of these images and words — not just by his consenting nod and thunder, but in the "Series of new time" (1028) that here begins. These new times will witness the divine birth, as Virgil's eclogue tells us: "iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto" (4.7). The event there described Dryden and his audience knew to be the birth of Christ, the advent of the dominion of grace, the incarnation of the Word. That entrance of the eternal Word into human time establishes both the
historicity and the essential truth of Dryden's fiction. It confirms the validity of God's own poem, which is creation in general and David in particular, and provides the ground for the human maker John Dryden's partial image of that creation. *Absalom and Achitophel* goes full circle, and "Godlike David" at the end of the poem is once more reproducing his maker's image in the land. Even the metaphor of paternity is restored to honor through the divine paternity and the divine sonship that will flow from David's line. Language too is restored after the abuse heaped on it by Absalom, Achitophel, and Corah: in the laconic "He said" that concludes David's speech, to which "Th'Almighty, nodding, gave Consent" (1026), and in the birth of the Word lie the restitution of all words and the vindication of all poetry — including this present fiction — as a true image of reality.

III

*Absalom and Achitophel* concludes as Fielding's *Amelia* concludes, with freedom from law and renewed access to grace, because both are works written in the epic tradition. That tradition is not just a vague group of themes and devices but a precise body of subject matter and form capable of manifesting itself in many guises. *Absalom and Achitophel* incarnates it for the last time, in English, as serious verse composition. After this, it will metamorphose itself into many parodic forms, both verse and prose, before Fielding once again seriously gives it flesh in his last (what we call) novel. To begin to understand those transformations, and to grasp the reasons for the necessary death of epic's poetic body, we must first comprehend the changes epic underwent before Dryden used it. What happened to the idea of epic between Virgil and Dryden — between the *Aeneid* and *Absalom and Achitophel* — accounts in many ways for its protean avatars afterward.

The *Aeneid* forms the core of the English epic tradition. From it sprout all of the ramifications of that tradition, in prose or verse, whether labeled romance or epic or novel. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, no matter how largely they may figure in an individual writer's imagination, remain in comparison to the *Aeneid* peripheral to the growth and development
of the genre in English. Even in the works of Pope, who was probably more familiar with the Greek epics than any major English writer before or since, the Aeneid provides the essential material upon which his imagination primarily works wherever he approaches the precincts of epic. This does not deny that Homer is important to the development of epic; it only says that in the English tradition he is less important than Virgil. This book will offer many occasions to speak of Homer; it will demand on many more that I talk of Virgil.

There are good reasons for this, the primary ones obviously being linguistic. Latin was the uniform language of learned men; Greek was not. The Middle Ages largely lost contact with Greek language and learning, and even after the Renaissance, knowledge of Greek belonged to the few among educated men rather than to the mass of them. Greek texts were published with Latin translations and Latin notes, and it is probable that it was through the Latin rather than directly from the Greek that most readers who encountered Greek literature at all made their contact. The second, and I think equally important, reason lies in the elaborate and prestigious body of commentary that gathered around the Aeneid and that found in that poem the paradigm of its genre.

I propose to discuss here a chronological selection of what strike me as key commentaries on the Aeneid — interpretative commentaries, not philological scholia. By so doing, it is not my intention to give the impression that there ever existed a uniform, unvarying, and never-broken tradition of Virgilian exegesis — a great chain of Virgil. Rather, I simply want to demonstrate the existence, ubiquity, and persistence of certain attitudes toward Virgil and his poem along with what seem to me the important qualifications and modifications of those attitudes. Particular attitudes toward epic poetry, particular ideas about the Aeneid, occur in strikingly similar forms in commentators from Macrobius to Le Bossu. That in itself is important, but the light such ideas cast upon the fate of epic is even more so.

In a very real sense, Macrobius presents whatever "Virgilian tradition" there is already fully formed. His notion of Virgil and his poem contain already all of the attitudes that the Renaissance will see in poets and epic poetry. Let me, for the sake of illustration, simply juxtapose a
Epic to Novel

passage from the *Saturnalia* with one from Tasso's *Discourses of the Epic Poem*:

You see — do you not? — that the use of all these varied styles is a distinctive characteristic of Vergil's language. Indeed, I think it not without a kind of foreknowledge that he was preparing himself to serve as a model for all, that he intentionally blended his styles, acting with a prescience born of a disposition divine rather than mortal. And thus it was that with the universal mother, Nature, for his only guide he wove the pattern of his work — just as in music different sounds are combined to form a single harmony. For in fact, if you look closely into the nature of the universe, you will find a striking resemblance between the handiwork of the divine craftsman and that of our poet. Thus, just as Vergil's language is perfectly adapted to every kind of character, being now concise, now copious, now dry, now ornate, and now a combination of all these qualities, sometimes flowing smoothly or at other times raging like a torrent; so it is with the earth itself, for here it is rich with crops and meadows, there rough with forests and crags, here you have dry sand, here, again, flowing streams, and parts lie open to the boundless sea. I beg you to pardon me and not charge me with exaggeration in thus comparing Vergil with nature, for I think that I might fairly say that he has combined in his single self the diverse styles of the ten Attic orators, and yet not say enough.

Yet for all that, the world, which includes in its bosom so many and so diverse things, is one, one in its form and essence, one the knot with which its parts are joined and bound together in discordant concord; and while there is nothing lacking in it, yet there is nothing there that does not serve either for necessity or ornament. I judge that in the same way the great poet (who is called divine for no other reason but that, because he resembles in his works the supreme architect, he comes to participate in his divinity) is able to form a poem in which as in a little world can be read in one passage how armies are drawn up, and in various others
there are battles by land and sea, attacks on cities, skirmishes, duels, jousts, descriptions of hunger and thirst, tempests, conflagrations, prodigies; there are a variety of celestial and infernal councils, and the reader encounters seditions, discords, wanderings, adventures, incantations, works of cruelty, audacity, courtesy, and generosity, and actions of love, now unhappy, now happy, now pleasing, now causing compassion. Yet in spite of all, the poem that contains so great variety of matter is one, one is its form and its soul; and all these things are put together in such a way that one has relation to the other, one corresponds to the other, the one necessarily or apparently so depends on the other that if one part is taken away or changed in position the whole is destroyed. And if this is true, the art of composing a poem is like the nature of the universe, which is composed of contraries, such as appear in the law of music, for it there were no multiplicity there would be no whole, and no law, as Plotinus says.¹³

This exalted vision of the poet corresponds in Macrobius to the canonization of Virgil as philosopher and source of truth. Macrobius (in his commentary on the Somnium Scipionis) links Virgil and Homer with Cicero and Plato as “doctrinal authorities.”¹⁴ (The association with Plato will be lengthily exploited by Cristoforo Landino a thousand years later.) At roughly the same historical moment, Servius, in his commentary on the Aeneid, pictures Virgil as the same sort of polymath and warns at the beginning of the sixth book that “All Virgil is full of wisdom, but especially this book, the chief part of which is taken from Homer. Some things in it are stated simply, others are taken from history, many from the exalted sciences of Egyptian philosophy and theology, so that several passages of this book have had entire treatises devoted to them.” Admittedly, this is not specific. Servius, although filled with admiration for Virgil’s wisdom, rarely and seemingly reluctantly allegorizes or expounds that wisdom (his explanation of the golden bough is an important exception). Neither did Macrobius compile a systematic exegesis of the Aeneid, although he does in the course of the Saturnalia expound
many specific points. What is important about the work of these men is the kind of attitude they set up toward, and the sort of expectations they generate about, Virgil and his *Aeneid*. The poet is a kind of demigod, and builds his poem with the same sort of wisdom that built the greater creation in which we dwell. It stands to reason then — especially since the poet is also a teacher of the order of Cicero and Plato — that in his poem we can, if we look rightly, discover profound moral and philosophical truths about that larger creation.

Later commentators addressed themselves directly to the specific nature of those truths. The commentary of Fulgentius (*De Continentia Virgiliana*) may strike us as crude and even silly, but it established patterns (or simply followed patterns already established) in Virgilian exegesis that persisted through and after the Middle Ages. Its expectations about the *Aeneid* remain, with some differences in terminology, the expectations of the seventeenth century. In Fulgentius's view, Virgil's minor poems allegorically reveal the secrets of the physical universe; the *Aeneid* concerns itself with “the condition of human life.”

The subject matter of the poem is the acquisition, management, and perfection of wisdom. The shade of Virgil kindly explains to Fulgentius that this corresponds in human development to birth, learning, and happiness. (At this point in Fulgentius's commentary, Virgil compares these stages to the corresponding stages in the educational process. This link between the epic and the process of formal education is a facet of the genre that also figures largely in the commentary of Bernardus Silvestris and less prominently but still importantly in almost all subsequent readings of the *Aeneid.* The kind of wisdom in question Fulgentius's Virgil very clearly defines as a philosophical rather than a theological virtue; Virgil himself was, as Fulgentius several times has him point out, a pagan and not a Christian. This explicit denial of Christian content offers an important clue not just to the understanding of epic (that seems bound up in the notion of wisdom and its affiliations with the educational process) but to the medieval approach to secular or profane poetry generally. Fulgentius several times interjects to draw parallels between Virgil's exegesis of his own poem and some Christian doctrines; in each case, Virgil firmly denies that the specific doctrine was known to him. The parallels remain
only parallels, not coincidences or foreshadowings; and what ought to be discussed in profane poetry, Virgil implies, is not Christian dogma but the highest philosophic and scientific knowledge of the pagan world.

From this point on, Fulgentius's interpretation of the *Aeneid* — or rather, the interpretation he puts in Virgil's mouth — sets a pattern from which later commentaries will scarcely deviate. The philosophical core of the *Aeneid* begins not *in medias res* but *ab ovo*, with the birth of man into the storms and dangers of the temporal world (the storm and shipwreck of book one). The first, second, and third books describe the various vagaries and physical and mental imperfections of infancy and childhood, up to the point at which Anchises dies. The burial of Anchises represents Aeneas's release from parental control and his entrance into the life of the passions, symbolized by hunting, the storm (violent emotional disturbances), and his affair with Dido. At the urging of intelligence (Mercury), he abandons love, which then falls to ashes (Dido on the funeral pyre). Having reached a more prudent age, he follows the memory of parental example and engages in exercises proper to a cultured man (the funeral games). In the sixth book, Aeneas approaches the temple of Apollo, that is, he begins to study the mysteries of wisdom. He buries Misenus at this point because Misenus etymologically means vainglory, and this false pride must be abandoned before he can acquire the secrets of wisdom. The entrance of the underworld is his entrance into knowledge; here he contemplates the punishments of evildoers, the rewards of good men, and the follies of youth. Later, in seeing Dido among the shades, he reflects upon his former lust and is moved to repentance. He sees many being punished for the dreadful sin of pride. His planting the golden bough at the entrance of Elysium indicates that when the task of learning is accomplished, it must be planted forever in the memory. Elysium means release, a life freed from the fear of teachers.

In the Elysian fields he sees Musaeus first. Musaeus means the gift of the Muses, the best poet of them all, who points out to him his father and the river, Lethe; the father, that is to say, that he may adopt a habit of seriousness, and Lethe, that he
may forget childish levity. Just reflect on the name itself of Anchises; in Greek Anchises is *ano scenon*, that is, inhabiting the fatherland. Now there is one God who is the father and the king of all, dwelling alone in the heavens who is known with the aid of the gift of knowledge. For note what Anchises teaches his son: “First, the heaven and earth, and the watery plains, the shining globe of the moon and Titan’s star.”

In the seventh book, he arrives at Ausonia (growth in virtue) and chooses Lavinia (the way of labors) for his wife. In the eighth book, he seeks the help of Evander (the good man or human goodness) and arms himself against the attacks of evil. The ninth book describes his struggle with Turnus, who represents a violent mind (*turos nus*). Juturna is the sister of Turnus and represents destruction (which lasts long: *diuturna*), both of which Aeneas must overcome. Generally speaking, the second six books show the good man, having acquired wisdom, actively struggling against vice. (For this reason, in commentaries such as Landino’s, where the wisdom acquired by the hero is defined as an essentially contemplative virtue, the last six books have no real place. Landino almost totally ignores them and concentrates his attention and the emphasis of his interpretation on Aeneas’s journey, culminating in the achievement of contemplative wisdom in the sixth book.)

Thus badly condensed and baldly stated, Fulgentius’s reading of the *Aeneid* must sound far more absurd than it actually is. His ignoring of narrative causality and sequence and his consequent treatment of each book as a self-contained unit account for the greatest divergences between his interpretation and Virgil’s text; but the ages-of-man theory, the view of epic as a step-by-step examination of the growth and maturation of man, that he derived from this method persuaded and satisfied most of the Middle Ages — including such eminent minds as Petrarch’s and Dante’s — no doubt because he is not entirely wrong. Tracing the growth process from infancy on up may be a distortion, but it is a distortion of a process of intellectual maturation that is genuinely present in Virgil’s text. The *Aeneid* is most definitely about — among many other things — growth in wisdom, and Fulgentius in linking that growth with formal
education and with the ages of man simply expressed a sound insight in terms congenial to his times. Moreover, though his commentary may wander fairly far from the literal meaning of Virgil's text, it is still tied to it by two main facts. The first is the assumption, shared by late classical culture and the Christian Middle Ages, that Virgil was indeed a polymath, and that consequently the *Aeneid* covertly incorporated a great deal of esoteric knowledge that the man seeking true wisdom was under every obligation to unearth in every way possible. The second is Fulgentius's consistently etymological mode of procedure. For him, names — proper names particularly — provide the clues to the deeper meaning of the poem, and by etymological analysis (some farfetched in the extreme, some sound) he works out the allegory of the poem. A small example: the storm in book one is stirred up by Juno through the agency of Eolus. Here is Fulgentius's Virgil's explanation of that event.

I introduced a shipwreck to represent the danger of birth in which there is a risk for the mother in giving birth and a danger for the infant in birth itself. The human race is universally involved in this necessity. And that you might understand this more clearly, this shipwreck was stirred up by Juno who is the goddess of birth. She sends Eolus; in Greek Eolus is *eon olus*, that is, destruction of life.\(^{17}\)

Similarly, Fulgentius explains Palinurus as "wandering vision," Mis-enus as "vainglory," Anchises as "the inhabitor of the fatherland," and uses all of these etymologies as clues to the real meaning of the episode.

It seems important to point out here that, unlike the allegory of Scripture, the allegory of the poets, as Fulgentius explains it, is a self-enclosed linguistic system. God's word is polysemous, because God in effect speaks things as well as words, so that for the interpretation of Scripture one can appeal to the nature of the thing as well as to the meaning of the word. For poets, only the meaning of the word is available, and they must build their microcosms, and critics must pursue their meanings, through the shadow of language.\(^{18}\) Narrative, the story, is the *fictum*, the made-up; the meanings of words are the real — and in
Epic to Novel

Poetry at least there is an intrinsic and essential continuity between the name and the thing, between the shadow and the body casting the shadow, between *verbum* and *verum*. For this reason, the hinge of the comparison Macrobius draws between the *Aeneid* and the world turns on Virgil's eloquence — his style recreates the reality of the world, and that worldly variety itself is implicitly understood to be God's rhetoric of things.

Fulgentius both insists on, and struggles against, the linguistic enclosure of epic. Virgil's earliest remarks in his commentary violate most of the rules of grammar and logic to isolate individual words as atoms of meaning, the essential seeds of the significance of the whole poem.

And to satisfy your curiosity more fully on this point, I say that there are three stages in human life, the first is to have, then to rule over what one has, and thirdly to adorn what one rules. Therefore notice that these three stages are set down in the one line of ours, that is, *arma*, *virum*, and *primus*. 

Arma, that is, strength, refers to the bodily substance; virum, that is, wisdom, refers to the intellectual substance and primus, that is, prince, refers to the judging substance. Thus you have the three in their proper order, having, ruling, and adorning. Therefore under the figure of a narrative (sub *figuralitatem historiae*) I have shown the full condition of human life; first, being born, then learning, and finally happiness.¹⁹

Bernardus Silvestris's commentary will do the same thing to Virgil's sixth book: there Bernardus sets out to explain every word of the text, so that his work becomes almost an allegorical lexicon. But both commentators also push against the trap of language and attempt to break through the enclosure of epic to the reality outside it. Bernardus tries this by using analogy — of which more later — and Fulgentius by his frequent appeals to the spectral Virgil to admit cognates with the truths of revelation — that is to say, with Scripture. In either case, the poem would then be susceptible of analysis according to the methods of biblical allegoresis, and the linguistic trap would be successfully sprung.
The trick is not a contemptible one: Dante in his *Commedia* makes the claim for his poem that Virgil here implicitly rejects for his, and the results prove that the game is worth the candle. This kind of self-consciousness about its limitations — its style, its rhetoric, its form, its dependence on so inadequate a vehicle as language — seems to me absolutely characteristic of epic. As the supreme genre of classical and neoclassical literary theory, it is the most literary genre in its consciousness of its materials and its desire to transcend them. What epic seems always to want to do, and what the writers of epic always to try, is not to manipulate words but to shape reality. At least half of the works I am going to talk about in this book concern themselves with the way literature spills over into life — the way art transmutes itself into reality and in the process transforms reality.

The most important and extensive commentary on the *Aeneid* produced in the Middle Ages, that of Bernardus Silvestris, continues quite clearly the attitudes and techniques of Fulgentius. Bernardus's mode of reading the *Aeneid* bears close relation to Fulgentius's (and to Prudentius's *Psychomachia*). The name of the character, place, or object furnishes the primary clue to its essence; its role in the poem is thus examined in this light, and its meaning almost invariably located (as in Fulgentius) in a kind of psychomachy — Aeneas the human soul, and everything else its affections, virtues, vices, or the temptations or maturational stages through which it must pass. The subject matter of epic is still, roughly, "the condition of human life." This is by no means to belittle Bernardus's work; on the contrary, it is a thoroughly sophisticated piece of literary criticism that shows tact and insight, respect for the literal meaning of Virgil's poem, and a consistent logic of exegesis. It may be the most important literary critical document of the Middle Ages for what it tells us about poetry and the way it was read. The commentary is really a tractate on education (cf. the educational concerns of Fulgentius's commentary), filled with remarks on the parts and functions of the trivium and quadrivium, with special attention devoted to the character and office of poetry.

Since Bernardus's commentary seems to me so crucial a document, I propose to discuss it here in some detail. I will not attempt to point out
all the lines of indebtedness to Fulgentius and Macrobius; it is enough to know that Bernardus borrowed freely from them and apparently felt few qualms about reshaping their ideas for his own purposes. He will quickly reveal himself as a further expositor of their general attitude and approach to Virgil. Bernardus’s tone — at least initially — is that of an experienced teacher or lecturer expounding familiar or basic material: he is jocular, orderly; he makes transitions easily and clearly. One could speculate that his Commentum is compiled from lecture notes without being at all false to its tone or uncomplimentary to Bernardus. He was clearly an excellent teacher.

He begins by citing Macrobius to the effect that we are to observe two kinds of doctrine in the Aeneid, the truth of philosophy and the poetic fiction (figmentum). He proceeds to investigate “whence it proceeds and how and why [unde agat et qualiter et cur].” Unde provides the poet’s intention, in this case to tell the story of the Trojan exiles, not according to the truth of history (which is found in Dares), but in order to please Augustus. He also writes to imitate Homer, book 2 being the equivalent of the Iliad, books 1 and 3–12, the Odyssey. Qualiter explains the mode of the narration: Virgil employs artificial (in medias res) rather than natural (sequential) order. To explain cur, Bernardus remarks that poets write for the sake of utility (satirists) or delight (comic poets) or both (historic poets). We delight in seeing human experiences imitated, and we learn from these examples to seek honesta and to flee illicita. For example: from the labors of Aeneas we draw an example of endurance, from his love for Anchises and Ascanius, an example of piety; from the veneration he shows toward the gods and from the oracles he seeks, from the sacrifices he offers, from the vows and prayers he pours out, we are invited to religion. Through his immoderate love for Dido we are recalled from desire for illicit things. It is worth noting that for Bernardus these form the overt moral of the fictum and explain why the poet is narrating these events in the first place; Bernardus has not yet begun talking about the covert allegory.

These three items also serve the office of proem (to both the poem and the Commentum, apparently): unde renders the reader docile, qualiter benevolent, cur attentive. This accomplished, Bernardus turns his at-
tention to the philosophic truth of the *Aeneid*, which is about the nature of human life. The mode of procedure is this: *sub integumento*, Virgil describes what the human spirit, temporarily placed in the human body, does or suffers. In this writing, he employs natural order and thus observes both orders in his work, the poetic using artificial, the philosophic natural — as, seemingly, is appropriate to each. “*Integumentum vero est genus demonstrationis sub fabulosa narratione veritatis involvens intellectum, unde et involucrum dicitur* [In fact, the integument is a kind of presentation that wraps the significance of the truth under a fabulous narrative, whence it is also called the envelope]” (p. 3.17–20). We find the usefulness of such a work according to our knowledge of ourselves, for as Macrobius says, it is of great utility for a man to know himself. These facts explain for Bernardus the “unde et qualiter et cur” of the philosophic doctrine of the poem, and he now announces his intention of opening the integument of the twelve single books in sequence (in point of fact, his *Commentum* as we now have it breaks off in the middle of book 6).

Bernardus's mode of procedure is to begin his discussion of each book by a summation of the narrative content and to follow that by a summary statement of the philosophic content, in a manner similar to Fulgentius's Virgil's demands for a summary of the content of each book before his exposition of it. Bernardus then goes into greater or lesser detail in his explanation according to no pattern that I have been able to discover. Indeed, his treatment of book 6 varies even from the simple formal pattern just described: it contains little summation of any kind and takes the form of an examination of almost every important word of the text. A few generalizations are safe however. Bernardus's exegetical technique, though refining on Fulgentius's in thoroughness, subtlety, and literary sensitivity, resembles the latter's both in ignoring the causality and sequence of the plot and in being primarily etymological. The word, the name, still furnishes the essential clue to meaning. And like both Fulgentius and Macrobius, Bernardus has a strong tendency to platonize Virgil and to interpret the poem in the light of Neoplatonic conceptions. It will not be possible to reproduce here all or even a large part of Bernardus's exegesis, but I will try to give samples of his working
method and his critical bias. I hope, too, to demonstrate the extreme sophistication of Bernardus's criticism: the Commentum is no naïve document but (always granting its basic premises) an extremely supple piece of analysis.

For Bernardus, the first book of the Aeneid tells of man's first age. Through Eolus, the king of the winds who here evokes the storm at sea, we are brought to understand the birth of the child. He is called Eolus (eon olus = seculi interitus) because at the birth of man, seculum, that is, the life of the soul (vita animae) perishes, while depressed by the heaviness (gravitas, but used by Bernardus throughout with the obvious etymological connection with pregnancy, gravidus) of the flesh it descends from its divinity and assents to fleshly desire (libidini carnis). Thus Eolus sends forth the winds because the birth of man begets commotions, that is, vices. With these he attacks the sea, that is, the human body, which is a gulf of trackless and uncrossable humors. Here already Fulgentius's techniques have been subtilized and refined. The whole phenomenon of birth has been worked out linguistically by a group of verbs possessing a common sense of producing, begetting, bringing forth, which are in turn linked to the entrance of the soul (anima, spiritus) into the flesh (carnis, humor, mare) that Bernardus expresses succinctly by the meaningful gravitas-gravidus pun. Moreover, Bernardus reinforces the purely linguistic link by employing a whole body of analogies, the most prominent of which in this section of the Commentum is that of the four elements of the universe to the four humors of the body — thus the humor of the sea is the humor of the body, and the whole seemingly farfetched allegoresis is linked finally to Virgil's text by the touchstones of wind and sea, spiritus and humor, present in the text itself. By means of this sort of interpretation, the whole poem becomes, in effect, a giant synecdoche, and Bernardus in interpreting simply enlarges from part to whole, from particular to general. Allegory does not impose itself from without but generates itself from within: because for the Middle Ages analogy is true, allegory is necessary. That is to say, allegory is simply the rhetorical mode that embodies the dialectical mode of analogy; the two are literary and philosophical avatars of each other and are properly fused in a work like the Aeneid
that is both literary and philosophical. Parts, as Aquinas says, correspond to parts, and every medieval poet or commentator anticipates Ramus in what he makes of images. Analogy and allegory both offer imagistic shorthands, particulars that stand in relation to other particulars and to universals beyond them. More important, they validate each other: the rhetorical structure reproduces the logical structure of thought, and that very correspondence is a further validation of both. In this system, the meaning of the thing works to support the interpretation of the word, and Bernardus's criticism comes very close to escaping the confines of purely linguistic systematizing. It appeals outside itself — through analogy — for confirmation, even though it is finally still a closed linguistic system. The analogies themselves arise from language, and the whole interpretation depends in its totality on language: this explains the prominence and importance of Bernardus's synthetic puns — puns like gravitas-gravidus or anima as wind and soul or humor as sea and element — that linguistically join together disparate areas of reference. In the *Tale of a Tub*, Swift's narrator, Peter and Jack, the Sartorists and the Aeolists, will all join forces to turn this mode of analysis on its head.

Bernardus applies these logical and critical categories with some care. He knows that circumstances change cases, and his allegorizing almost never falls into the wooden equations characteristic of the psychomachy as genre. His remarks about the meaning of Aeneas and what these give rise to indicate clearly the self-consciousness of his interpretation.

Aeneas is called the son of Anchises and Venus. Anchises Bernardus interprets as celsa inhabitans (loosely, the high-dweller), which we understand to be the father of all presiding over all. We understand that there are two Venuses, the lawful goddess and the goddess of wantonness. We say that the lawful Venus is

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mundanam musicam \text{i.e. aequalem mundanorum proportionem, quam alii Astraeeam, alii naturalem iustitiam vacant.}
\]

\[
\text{Haec enim est in elementis, in sideribus, in temporibus, in animantibus [the harmony of the created world, that is, the even symmetry of worldly things, which some call Astrea and}
\]
others call natural justice. This Venus subsists in the elements, in the stars, in time, in living things. (p. 9.16-18)

However, we call the shameless Venus, the goddess of wantonness, concupiscence of the flesh because she is the mother of all fornications.

Note here that in this as in other mystical volumes equivocations and multivocations and diverse applications of the integument are found. According to Martianus’ book, you take Jove sometimes for the superior fire, sometimes the star, sometimes even the creator himself, Saturn now for time and now for the planet, Mercury here for eloquence and there for a star. This multiplex signification with respect to the diverse meanings of the integument should be observed in all mystical works, since truth is not static [sin vero stare veritas non poterit]. Therefore in this work these things are discovered because the same name indicates diverse natures and on the other hand different names indicate the same; as when Apollo sometimes designates divine wisdom, sometimes human, Jupiter sometimes fire, sometimes God [summun deum], Venus sometimes concupiscence of the flesh, sometimes the harmony of the world [mundi concordiam]; or when Jupiter and Anchises designate the creator. Therefore when you find Venus, the wife of Vulcan, the mother of locus and Cupido, understand the pleasure of the flesh, because she is joined to natural heat and produces levity and sexual desire. Whenever you read that Venus and Anchises had a son Aeneas, understand through Venus the harmony of the world, through Aeneas the human spirit. For Aeneas is so called because ennos demas is the inhabitant of the body [habitator corporis]. . . . Demas, the chain, is identified with the body because it is the prison of the soul. Therefore Aeneas is the son of Venus and Anchises because the human spirit, from God, through concord begins to enter and live in the body. We say these things about Anchises, Aeneas, and Venus because in many places in this book we see they are necessary. (pp. 9.21–10.19)
In this manner, Bernardus continues to explain the first book of the *Aeneid* in terms of the tribulations of infancy. The second book he interprets briefly as describing boyhood and the acquisition of speech. The third book displays the weaknesses and passions of adolescence. After various misadventures, Aeneas arrives at Delos, where he is warned by Apollo “to seek his ancient mother.”

Two ancient mothers, two regions, Crete and Italy, are the two beginnings of Aeneas, the nature of the body and the nature of the soul. For by Crete we understand bodily nature, which is the beginning of the temporal life of Aeneas. And Crete is called by antiphrasis *crasis theos*, that is, divine judgment. For carnal nature judges badly about divine things when it places them after temporal. Through Italy, which is interpreted “increase,” we understand the nature of the soul, which is rationality and immortality, virtue, knowledge. He is ordered to seek these things by Apollo, that is, wisdom. For wisdom warns him to love that divinity he possesses. But because Aeneas mistakes the oracle, he seeks Crete when ordered to go to Italy. He mistook the oracle of Apollo in this manner: he sought wisdom from man as you read in Boethius [Bernardus here quotes from the *Consolation of Philosophy*, 2.4.72 ff.]. . . .(p. 20.3–18)

Thus misdirected, Aeneas continues wandering and encountering various vices until his father dies.

He buries his father in Drepanum. Drepanum (*drimos pes*) is interpreted puerile acerbity, which is wrath which customarily infests boys with excessive fervor. In wrath his father is buried, that is, God is given to oblivion. For the wrathful are almost apostates. Burial is forgetfulness. (p. 23.16–21)

Bernardus’s treatment of book 4 provides a good example of both the subtlety and implications of his method. The whole interpretation holds together by virtue of an elaborate series of physical, emotional, and
intellectual analogies that are expressed simultaneously and interchangeably by the linguistic relations of the coct-word forms Bernardus ubiquitously employs.

In this fourth book the nature of youth is mystically expressed. But first we give the narrative summation, then the exposition.

Having buried his father he goes hunting. Driven by storms into a cave, he diverts himself with Dido and then commits adultery. Which shameful habit he abandons by the counsel of Mercury. Dido, having been left behind, withdraws and dies, cooked to ashes [Dido vero deserta in cineres excocata et demigrat].

By manifest and mystic narration the nature of youth is described. Burial of the father designates forgetfulness of the creator; he assiduously occupies himself in hunting and other occupations which pertain to youth. . . . By storm and rain he is forced to the cave, that is, by the commotions of the flesh and profusion of humor arising from the superfluity of food and drink he is led to the impurity of flesh and libido. Which carnal impurity is called cave, because it obscures serenity of mind and discretion. The profusion of humor from food and drink leads to impurity in this manner: in decoctione there are four humors: liquor, fumus, spuma et faex. After the humors of food and drink have been cooked [Decoctis . . . humoribus] in the cauldron of the stomach, the fumus thence resulting and ascending as the nature of lightness demands and by ascending and by purification through the arteries made rarer, comes to the brain and produces animal powers [animales virtutes]. By liquor the members grow strong. Faex is sent out into departure through the lower passages, spuma partly through perspiration, partly through the caves of the senses [foramina sensuum]. When however there is an excessive superfluity of spuma, which occurs in drunken feasts and drinking sessions, it is emitted through the male organ, which is nearest and subject to the stomach, converted into sperm, that is, male seed. Whence you read that Venus is
born from the spuma of the sea and so is called “frodon.”

Therefore the rains lead Aeneas to the cave. He is joined to Dido and delays a long while with her. The shameful crying of rumor does not recall him because youth ensnared in libido seeks neither what is lovely, or useful, or shameful, or not. At length, after a long deviation, he is warned by Mercury to leave. . . .

He warns and rebukes Aeneas because he finds him not regarding any useful task. . . . Aeneas departs from Dido and puts aside libido. Dido, abandoned, perishes and parts from this life burned into ashes [in cineres excocta]. For disused libido fails, and consumed by the fervor of manhood falls into ashes, that is, into solitary cogitations. (pp. 23.23-25.27)

Superfluity of humor in nature produces rain, in man, physiologically, sperm, emotionally, lust, intellectually, sin. All of these result from some form of decoction, and the ultimate fate of the libido produced is to be consumed in yet another — different and better — decoction.

Book 5, according to Bernardus, describes the nature of manhood. Having abandoned the indulgence of youth, Aeneas now offers four exercises in virtue to God (the funeral games in Anchises’ honor). The games illustrate the virtues of temperance, fortitude, prudence, and justice. At the conclusion of this book, Aeneas is warned by the image of his father that he will have to descend to hell to see him there. This means, says Bernardus, that Aeneas will have to descend to mundane things through cogitation, and thus he will see the creator (his father) because although the creator is not in creatures, he may be known by the cogitation of creatures. At this point in the narrative, the helmsman Palinurus (whom Bernardus etymologically interprets as “wandering vision”) dies. Until now, wandering vision steered the will (ship) of Aeneas; but when Aeneas guides it, Palinurus perishers.

As prologue to his explanation of the sixth book, Bernardus discusses the possible meanings of the descensus ad inferos, drawing heavily on Macrobius’s notions in his commentary on the Somnium Scipionis. Essentially, he understands four different kinds of descensus: the way of
nature, the way of virtue, the way of vice, and the way of artifice. The natural way is birth, the descent of the soul into the body that, he explains at length, is properly called *infernum*. The virtuous way is that of the wise man who descends to creatures through contemplation in order to better know the creator; such were Hercules and Orpheus. The vicious way is to serve *temporalia* with the whole mind; such was Eurydice. The artificial way is, simply, magic. The integument of the sixth book describes the fourth way (Bernardus sees the death and cremation of Misenus as a magical rite, a sacrifice to demons), while the substrate of the book describes the second. Bernardus also links Aeneas’s activities at this point to the process of formal education: the grove of Trivia is the study of eloquence; the three ways equal the three arts — grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric. The golden roofs of the temple are the four mathematical arts in which the gold of philosophy is contained. The faithful Achates is the habit of study. Like Servius, Bernardus links the golden bough with the study of philosophy in its two branches, theoretic and practical; and like Fulgentius, he sees Aeneas’s journey through hell as some sort of educational tour.

Bernardus glosses almost every word of the text in a detailed expansion and explanation of Aeneas’s descent as the contemplative descent of the wise man to an examination of creatures. It is not possible to reproduce this in any great detail; his incomplete commentary on the sixth book is more than three times as long as his commentaries on the first five books combined. Essentially — and this is perhaps the most important aspect of his *Commentum* — he sees Aeneas’s descent with the Sybil and his progress through the lower world up to his entrance into the Elysian fields as a recapitulation of what has preceded in the poem. Just as the spirit descended into matter at birth (a descent to hell in itself: the natural way), the mind now descends to a contemplation of creatures and reviews the paths it has taken and the errors it has committed: thus the meetings with Trojan heroes, thus the encounter with Dido. The Sybil herself functions as, and is to be understood in a way similar to, Boethius’s Lady Philosophy, guiding Aeneas to an understanding of his past mistakes. The purpose of this journey is to free Aeneas from his bondage to creatures by a thorough knowledge of them, so that he may
pass on to see the creator (i.e., Anchises). This is the circular motion of thought as conceived by medieval speculation: the mind descends from God into creatures and proceeds through a contemplation of creatures to return to God again. This circular pattern forms the core of Bernardus's understanding of the *Aeneid*: it is for him a poem about the acquisition of wisdom that re-creates in itself the form of the process it describes. This notion provides the basis for his explanation of the first half of the poem, and he recapitulates it in his interpretation of the first half of book 6 and again, more briefly, in his allegorizations of the myths of Orpheus and Eurydice and of Castor and Pollux, both of which he understands as expressing the relations of soul and body, divine mind and infernal matter. Bernardus's *Commentum* breaks off before Aeneas enters the fields of the blessed and sees Anchises, but from its similarities to Fulgentius and from the exegetical patterns he has already set up, we can readily see the probable outlines of his allegory: having acquired knowledge of terrestrial matters, Aeneas will obtain from Anchises the requisite celestial lore to return to his earthly life and, in yet another recapitulation, triumph over those vices and material forces to which he had earlier fallen victim so that, after the conclusion of Virgil's poem, he will be ready to ascend once again to God as the reward of his achieved virtues (so at least Maphius Vegius understood the poem in the fifteenth century when he wrote a thirteenth book, explicitly giving Aeneas the apotheosis he seems to have earned). Aeneas will choose as his wife Lavinia, the way of labors, rather than Dido, the way of pleasure. The pattern seems quite simple, quite clear. Aeneas accomplishes his first *descensus ad inferos* by birth, as all men must, and he continues it throughout his minority by succumbing to a series of vices: these are Bernardus's first and third ways. In the sixth book, he once again descends to hell, this time according to Bernardus's second and fourth ways, by contemplation and by magic. This time of course a conversion takes place, and Aeneas comes to a recognition of his failings and begins to mend them. Consequently, in the same book he begins an ascent to God — contemplatively here — that will be later continued and confirmed when he returns to active life and triumphs over the vices and trials that previously defeated him. The Sybil makes this aspect of things explicit when she warns
Aeneas that he shall again have to fight Greeks, again encounter an Achilles, see another Simois and Xanthus and Doric camp, again because of a foreign bride, another Helen (Aeneid 6.83–94). So the second half of the Aeneid is in effect a repetition of the first half, with the important difference that the direction of the narrative and of Aeneas's fortunes is upward rather than downward, ascent toward God rather than descent to creatures. This sixth book functions as the nexus, the conversion point, that terminates one journey and transforms it into its mirror image — all of which, by the way, is not in any structural particular untrue to Virgil's text. However much our understanding of the events of the Aeneid may differ from Bernardus's, we can hardly quarrel with his perception of its structure.

Cristoforo Landino's immensely important Disputationes Camaldulenses continues and refines this kind of reading of the Aeneid. Like Fulgentius and Bernardus, Landino begins his allegorization ab ovo, with "the first age of man." Unlike the earlier commentators, Landino does not start with book one of the poem, but rather with the chronologically earliest events in the poem, Aeneas's recollections of Troy. From that point, he proceeds through the sequence of events contained in books 1–6, following the loose pattern of the maturation of the hero. Landino's hero, however, is not the Everyman of Fulgentius and Bernardus; he is a particularly gifted man working toward a full achievement of his traditional epithet, pius — a word that in Landino's reading comes to embrace the whole range of relations of fathers and sons, king and subject, mind and body, individual intelligence and eternal wisdom (this emphasis, by the way, bears very directly on Absalom and Achitophel, which Dryden carefully locates "in pious times"). Aeneas's goal is Italy, which Landino flatly equates with contemplation, and he struggles to free himself from the attractions of corporeal existence and to achieve the stability of the contemplative life. Although Landino differs slightly from his predecessors in his more careful attention to details of the text (he occasionally understands as the allegory of a passage what Bernardus would identify as only the overt moral) and in his interpretation of some of those details (Anchises, for example, he understands as sensuality because he is Aeneas's mortal parent, the father of his body), and
although his platonizing of the text is distinctly Renaissance and much marked by the thought of his friend Marsilio Ficino (he identifies Aeneas's mother Venus with the angelic intelligence discussed in the Symposium), the broad outlines of his interpretation still follow those of Fulgentius and Bernardus. Aeneas's descent into hell is still the descent of the mind in sensualitatem that it may gain knowledge of what ought to be sought and what to be avoided. Misenus still remains, etymologically, false glory, and must be buried before the mind can free itself to pursue true knowledge. And however much he ignores the last six books, Landino still implicitly preserves Bernardus's mirroring structure in his explanation of the Sybil's warning to Aeneas of the graver dangers yet before him: having passed through the storms of the active life, he must yet face the resurgence of memory and desire for those things that the life devoted to contemplation must put aside.

Since Landino's reading of the Aeneid is discussed in rather great detail by Don Cameron Allen in his Mysteriously Meant, and since the major points of Landino's exegesis are not that radically different from those of his predecessors, it would be just as well here to examine his departures from them. Landino makes three really important changes in the interpretative tradition: first, he raises his hero to the status of exceptional man, destined for glory; second, he focuses attention almost exclusively on Aeneas's journey and makes that central to his reading; and third, he explains the Dido episode, in accordance with his active-contemplative dialectic, not as the attraction of carnality but as the lure of the active, civic life that distracts man from his progress toward the true summum bonum, the contemplation and possession of wisdom. This last is completely consistent with Landino's overall view of the Aeneid and with the positions taken by the participants in the discussions that form the first two books of the Disputationes Camaldulenses: the contemplative life is superior to, and provides the norms for, the active life. But consistent or not, these changes put the formal verse epic on an unswervable path toward extinction. They set up a crucial disjunction between tenor and vehicle, between the almost mutually exclusive demands of an "executive" story — the journey — and a "deliberative" meaning — the growth of a superior mind in contemplative virtue.
Landino's reading of the *Aeneid* completes a process that began with Macrobius by completely externalizing the epic plot and internalizing the real action. Faced with this bifurcation, would-be writers of epic had two choices: to perpetuate the split but utilize it through allegory, as Spenser did (who, incidentally, also dispenses of contemplation as an ultimate goal in his first book when he has the holy hermit point out to Red Crosse Knight that he is not called to contemplation, that he must return to the world and the active life); or to jettison the external action and redefine human heroism in purely internal terms, as Milton did. In any event, after Landino the breach must have been apparent. Epic was inextricably tied up with notions of education, of knowledge, of wisdom. That did not change, but the meanings of those words most emphatically did. If in the Middle Ages the words *knowledge* and *wisdom* could encompass the whole range of human consciousness, from what we would consider basic common sense through to the theological entity Wisdom, by the Renaissance those meanings had flown apart, and contemplative wisdom grew steadily more remote from life. The aesthetics of the sublime, tied onto epic in the course of the revival of Longinus, perhaps only raised two notes higher what had become an "O Altitudo" already beyond the range of human hearing.

So too with the epic hero. Following Landino's lead, later commentators and critics increased his stature from exceptional man to impossible man; they made a paragon of him. At the logical conclusion of this process, neoclassical epic theory demanded a perfect hero whose character is a constant, who is the absolutely devoted and aware servant of a cause that is really the subject of the poem. The hero became personalityless, identified with and desiring only the cause. He became the commander-in-chief, the leader of the cause. His supremacy of rank was the prerequisite of his being the chosen hero. His nobility now meant the end of his freedom of action, the subordination of his high qualities to the will of the cause. As a character symbolizing the beliefs and endeavors of a whole people or culture, he had to concern himself with the government of a state in its religious, political, and cultural aspects. For illustration of the literal truth of all this, one need only read Fenelon. His *Télémaque* is totally personalityless — indeed, comes at last to the
explicit realization that the ideal ruler must be totally selfless, having no desires whatever that spring from himself. *Télémaque* is a good illustration of the absolute irrelevance of neoclassical conceptions of epic: it could only possibly apply to one man, or a very few men, in a whole society; and what it demands of them, or would teach them, is simply beyond the reach of human nature.

Most of these notions are simply exaggerations or literalizations of traditional, and in many cases quite sound, insights into epic. They result, it seems to me, from a confusion of the interpretation and the poem, or — at worst — from a substitution of the interpretation for the poem. Epic, at the close of the Renaissance, had to bear the burden of its own hermeneutics. What I want to explore in the rest of this book is the process by which epicists first exploited that burden and then freed themselves of it, the process by which they restored epic to itself.

IV

*Absalom and Achitophel* provides a small-scale, straightforward adaptation of epic materials and a synopsis of the state of traditional epic poetry in the late seventeenth century. Central to it is the hero’s recognition of his identity and goal, just as the revelations of book 6 are crucial to Aeneas’s knowledge of himself and his goal, both in the fable and in the allegory. Dryden depicts this twice: parodically, as Achitophel tempts Absalom to assume a false messianic role, and straightforwardly, as David abandons the indulgence of the doting father and accepts his proper role as divinely appointed ruler. The hero’s self-knowledge — the kind of wisdom he is to attain and consequently the kind of person he is to be — determines the direction and shape of epic. David, as “godlike” ruler, must abandon his fatherly feelings and human compassion for his divine role. He must raise himself above human vicissitude to divine immutability. In the poem, David does not change, he only repeats: his mortal paternity is reiterated in his implicit divine paternity at the end of the poem and “Once more the Godlike David was Restor’d” (1030).

The poem takes its shape from this static conception of David. For
one thing, in *Absalom and Achitophel* — even the title is revealing in this respect — only the villains act. David and his party literally do nothing. Dryden identifies David so closely with the God whose image he bears that he seems to share in the divine immutability: he is so tightly linked to the cause he personifies, the reflection in the good order of human society of God's providential governing of the universe, that Dryden is forced in the poem to present him as essentially inhuman — personalityless, actionless, almost passionless, a mere exponent of the office he occupies. Everything about the fable assumes a necessity, an immutability, that is at once historical and ontological: given such and such evil men, given such and such a hero with such virtues, given a just and watchful God, given such historical precedent, then such a conclusion follows of necessity.

Even with Dryden's skillful handling, the static nature of the narrative stands out sorely and perhaps explains the many critical complaints about the incompleteness of the poem and the unrelatedness of its conclusion. Dryden has made of the allegorical epic fable and the exemplary hero that prescriptive criticism required of him an extended metaphysical conceit, in which the important factors are not what the human characters do but the changes that can be rung on the ideas they embody. He has structured the poem out of a series of antinomies that are finally resolved into oxymoric unities — the rebels and the royalists, motion and stability, time and eternity, flesh and spirit, idol and God, nature and grace, lie and truth. The Davids of the beginning and the end of the poem remain the same person: what changes is only our perspective on him, which of the king's two bodies Dryden directs our attention to. This process wrenches the epic out of the area of even ritualized human drama or even the formalized interactions of personalities and wills and moves it closer to the domain of psychomachy where ideas and virtues act directly upon each other with the essentially passive human soul as prize rather than protagonist: the ultimate hero of such an epic must become one of Swift's Houyhnhnms.

But Dryden also exploits several facets of the traditional epic that continue after him to play a large and important role, principally in the
development of the novel. His shifting of perspective from time to eternity, from the here-and-now to the over-arching providential plan and its consequent escape from motion into rest — these, for instance, become of increasing importance to Fielding, until they find their natural scope in Amelia, the last important attempt to write a “regular” epic in English. More important, Dryden clearly preserves and transmits the same sort of symmetrical structural pattern the commentators saw in the Aeneid: across the central nexus of the disquisition on government, parts correspond to parts — David's human paternity and divine, Absalom's false messianic role and David's true one, a catalogue of villains and a catalogue of heroes, the descending action of the conspiracy and near-rebellion and the ascending action of the loyalists and the king's stand.28 Neither do I think it farfetched to see in Dryden's detailed analogy between particular bodies and the body politic, between what boils in Absalom and what ferments in the mob, a strong similarity to the Virgilian commentators' concern with the “physiology” of intellectual and emotional processes: Swift's Tale of a Tub will exploit this aspect of epic. In addition, Dryden preserves the self-consciousness of epic about its own limitations: his implicit appeal outside the poem to the divine Word for verification is of a piece with the commentators' attempts to break through fiction into reality — an eruption that Pope will render chillingly in Dulness's “uncreating word.” The emphasis Dryden consequently puts upon the central position of verbal truth, the right use of words, also looms large in mock epics and novels, from his own MacFlecknoe through A Tale of a Tub and The Dunciad and into Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones. But Dryden's poetic revitalization of the conservative ideas of a patriarchal, patrilineal society forms his greatest contribution to the tradition that will culminate in Fielding's novels. In Absalom and Achitophel, the structural pivot point is the disquisition on government, which is couched in terms of the relations of fathers and sons, and David's paternity is the source of the poem's major problem. Virgil never let his reader forget the importance of Aeneas's paternity or of the race that will succeed him, from Iulus down to Julius and Augustus Caesar; and Homer drew a concise picture of the restora-
tion of proper patriarchal order and government when he showed, at the end of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus standing between his father Laertes and his son Telemachus, preparing to assert their hegemony over the island kingdom of Ithaca — a picture not greatly different, ideologically, from the scene at the end of *Absalom and Achitophel* where David stands between his God and his ultimate progeny to assert hegemony over his island kingdom. Neither does that scene differ greatly from the conclusion of another allegorical epic, *Tom Jones*, where Tom, at last restored to his proper relation with the paternal Squire Allworthy, is last seen founding his own family on his newly acquired private Hesperia, Squire Western's estate. The image of paternity and its associated ideas of fertility and birth lend themselves readily to parody, too, as Dryden shows in *MacFlecknoe*, where misuse of language leads to miscreation of all sorts. Such ideas crop up with an insistence that demonstrates their importance in *A Tale of A Tub*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Dunciad*, and *Tristram Shandy*, in all cases owing greater or lesser debts to the pattern established by Dryden. At any rate, all of this provides the final context in which it is necessary to see Dryden's poem: if we can see in David's stand against the rebels the same definitive stand against the forces of social disorder that Virgil portrayed in Aeneas's struggle with Turnus or Homer in Odysseus's battle with the suitors; if we can see in David's verbal assertion of the order of law and grace the same imposition of physical and metaphysical order that the divine fiat fixed upon chaos, then we are that much closer to a true understanding of Dryden's fiction and the resonances it held for its seventeenth-century audience.

V

Although chronologically prior, *MacFlecknoe* logically succeeds *Absalom and Achitophel*. It is full-blown mock epic: its protagonists, Flecknoe and Shadwell, stand in the same debased parodic relation to the conventional epic hero — to Aeneas, say — as Satan does to God. *MacFlecknoe*, moreover, bites the tail of epic and turns it upon itself. Its obsessive concern with literature, with language, with words, perverts the closed linguistic system of epic and transforms the container of the highest wisdom into a sterile bag of wind — literally and figuratively.
It begins the demonstration, which *The Dunciad* will complete, of the manner in which bad art and dullness debase life.

London appears in *MacFlecknoe* as Augusta — "The fair Augusta much to fears inclin'd" of lines 64–65. Dryden's few descriptive details pertinently link the city with Flecknoe and Shadwell and transform it from a place, the mere *locus* of their empire, to an actual extension of them and an embodiment of their art. The name Augusta itself connects the city with Flecknoe, whom the opening of the poem compared to Augustus (3). The Barbican and its surroundings (66–84) share, in their collapse, in the general decay to which all human things are subject and which, in Flecknoe's particular case, provides the occasion of the poem. It, too, like Flecknoe, is "now flourishing in Peace, / And blest with issue of a large increase" (7–8; cf. 72–78); and its mother-strumpets, infant punks, future heroes, and little Maximins provide a handy gloss on the nature of Flecknoe's progeny and confuse artistic and sexual production in exactly the same way that he and Shadwell do. Augusta's inclination to political fears parallels Shadwell's inclination to artistic dullness (65; cf. 189–90), and the line describing the Barbican — "An ancient fabrick, rais'd t'inform the sight" (66) — significantly reproduces the language and thought of one of Flecknoe's tributes to Shadwell: "his goodly Fabrick fills the eye" (25). Dryden metamorphoses Augusta into a body of which Flecknoe and Shadwell are the mind and soul.

Flecknoe chooses the city as the site of Shadwell's throne because it is receptive to the kind of empire he seeks to found there: city taste is ready for Shadwell. The genealogy Dryden has Flecknoe so carefully provide for his successor — Dekker, Heywood, Shirley, Ogilby — forces us to see Shadwell as the culmination of a long line of vulgar, inept poets who stand as representative of, and spokesmen for, the tastes of the city audience. That taste preferred masque, music, and spectacle to poetry, pageantry and opera to heroic drama; and this, I think, explains the appropriateness of the moldering "fabrick, rais'd t'inform the sight" as the location of Shadwell's throne: it physically recreates Shadwell's and the city's aesthetic. For this same reason, Shadwell is described in identical terms: the style is the man (and that, I may say prematurely, is the secret of *MacFlecknoe*.)

Shadwell's city genealogy reflects more than bad taste, however: it
also possesses a political aspect that illuminates another facet of London's role in the poem. By placing Shadwell in succession from a string of city poets and from Ogilby, who had managed the city's ceremonies at the coronation of Charles II, Dryden identifies him with the fluctuations of London's political allegiance— a trick that Shadwell himself made easier by his fawning dedication of *Psyche* (to which *MacFlecknoe* frequently alludes) to the Duke of Monmouth. The political aspects of Flecknoe's and Shadwell's roles have been present fairly explicitly from the beginning of the poem, of course, in the overt analogy of Flecknoe's kingdom of nonsense. More particularly, the comparison of him to Augustus would serve to call to mind the contemporary comparisons of the restoration of the Stuarts to the accession of Augustus and thus link Flecknoe in some strained way with Charles II. More explicitly, of course, Flecknoe's confrontation of the problem of succession aligns him with Charles and the Exclusion Crisis and makes the whole situation of *MacFlecknoe* roughly— very roughly — analogous to the contemporary political situation.

Neither Flecknoe nor Shadwell is Charles, however, and there are in Dryden's presentation of his case some significant differences that enable us to see them as the opposite in art of what Charles is in politics. Flecknoe's succession problem, for instance, involves not the fact that he has no legitimate son but that he has too many. And again unlike Charles, although Flecknoe rules "Through all the Realms of Non-sense, absolute" (6), his is also paradoxically an elective monarchy, as is shown by his choice of successor (rather than succession on the basis of primogeniture) and by his people's ratification of that choice: "He paus'd, and all the people cry'd 'Amen'" (144). All this tends to make him a figure more like Cromwell than like Charles and to tighten the bonds among Flecknoe, Shadwell, and the city.

This identification of the protagonists with their scene appears to be part of the overall strategy of the poem. Dryden on the one hand makes of Flecknoe, Shadwell, and Augusta (the use of the literary name rather than its common one has value too) interchangeable counters, signs of and for each other; in the most literal sense, Augusta embodies what Flecknoe and Shadwell stand for. On the other hand, this identification
enables Dryden to blur distinctions, to force the various theoretically ('in real life') distinct characters of the satire actually ('in art') to merge together: that is, Dryden erases the border line between art and reality, between person and thing, mind and matter, just as Flecknoe's empire ignores it. One bad poet, in such a world, can be the equivalent of a Whiggish city just as easily as he can be an example of simple dullness; it is, after all, just a matter of words. For example: the queens and future heroes, unfledged actors and infant punks of the Nursery (74–78) mingle promiscuity and rant just as Shadwell. "Swell'd with the Pride of thy Celestial charge; / And big with Hymn" (40–41), graphically merges two kinds of miscreation. The distinction between sexual and artistic creativity (and/or sterility) has been completely lost.

Against this background, the central action of MacFlecknoe, the coronation, acquires new depth of meaning. Dryden leads us to see in it not just the passing on of empire but the founding of a city, a polis, with all that that implies about the building of a civilization and a culture. His allusions to the Aeneid draw almost exclusively on the Virgilian preoccupation with the founding of Rome: his references to Shadwell as "our young Ascanius" (108) and "Rome's other hope" (109) recall precisely this emphasis of the Aeneid. Dryden draws the analogy quite overtly when Shadwell, at his coronation, sees "twelve reverend Owls" (129):

So Romulus, 'tis sung, by Tyber's Brook,
Presage of. Sway from twice six Vultures took.

(130–31)

The vultures, as Plutarch reports, indicated not only that Romulus should rule but also where the city should be built.32 This is the main action that MacFlecknoe imitates, the founding of Rome, the city of Augustus, the new Troy: Shadwell is founding Augusta, the English Troyovant.33

If the similarity I earlier suggested between Shadwell and the city is at all true, their likenesses should extend beyond their mutual "thoughtless majesty" to more substantial flaws. This, I think, is the case. Dryden presents both Flecknoe and Shadwell on one hand and Augusta on the
other as essentially self-contradictory: he embodies in them opposing characteristics that reflect their mutual confusions of value and role. Augusta is Rome, but it is also Carthage; Dryden calls Shadwell Ascanius, but he casts him as Hannibal.

At his right hand our young Ascanius sate,
Rome's other hope, and pillar of the State.
His Brows thick fogs, instead of glories, grace,
And lambent dullness plaid around his face.
As Hannibal did to the Altars come,
Sworn by his Syre a mortal Foe to Rome;
So Sh— swore, nor should his Vow bee vain,
That he till Death true dullness would maintain;
And in his father's Right, and Realms defence,
Ne'er to have peace with Wit, nor truce with Sense.
(108–17)

The “lambent dullness” recalls the lambent flames that played around Ascanius's brow and convinced Anchises of Aeneas's mission, thus initiating the journey that brought them to Italy (Aeneid 3.166–68). Immediately after this in MacFlecknoe follows the vow that brought Hannibal to Rome for very opposite reasons: Silius Italicus’s description of the scene has Hannibal explicitly swearing to once again destroy Troy — “Rhoeteaque fata revolvam” (Punica 1.115). All of these contradictions, however, are absorbed into the overriding reversal of the idea of Rome: the eternal city becomes the site of temporal decay; the Rome of law and culture dwindles to an Augusta of disorder and dullness. In the Flecknoe-Shadwell version of nature and art, there is nothing else. As Shadwell bears Flecknoe’s “perfect image” (15), and as Shadwell's characters are “All full of [him], and differing but in name” (162), so, too, Dryden makes their city in their own image, and renders the act of crowning Shadwell identical to the act of founding Augusta: they are in fact tautological.

Image — both the word and the conception — brings us closer to the center of MacFlecknoe. Flecknoe's quandary about the succession and the basis of his resolution of that problem provide the first major use of
the word in the poem and invoke most of the ideas about it which the rest of the poem will reverberate.

'tis resolv'd; for Nature pleads that He
Should onely rule, who most resembles me:
Sh--- alone my perfect image bears,
Mature in dullness from his tender years.
Sh--- alone, of all my Sons, is he
Who stands confirm'd in full stupidity.

(13-18)

Although nature may plead for Shadwell ("What share have we in Nature or in Art?" Flecknoe will later ask), Flecknoe's argument is ultimately drawn from supernature. His language rather obviously echoes the scriptural description of God's creation of man: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him" (Genesis 1:27). If this is the case, of course, then Flecknoe becomes a figure of God the Father — a preposterous enough idea, even if we accept it metaphorically as referring to him in his capacities as playwright and king: that then makes of Shadwell a creature with the same level of existence as Flecknoe's plays (most of which, appropriately, have not survived).

This confusion of Shadwell's status is, I think, deliberate on Dryden's part and useful for his purposes, but discussion of this aspect of the passage will have to wait until other elements in the poem are clarified.

More important than the reminiscence of the language of Genesis is Dryden's appropriation of ideas drawn from the theology of the Logos, the second person of the Trinity, who bears the "perfect image" of the Father. The situation at this point most resembles Milton's descriptions of the Father's promulgation of the regency of his Son (Paradise Lost, book 5), but it also draws upon the same sort of conceptions that Milton utilizes in Book 3, the dialogue in heaven between the Father and Son about the fate of man. There the second person is presented in his capacity as the Logos, the perfect expression of the Father: "in him all his Father shone, / Substantially express'd . . . " (Paradise Lost, 3.139-40). This particular locus makes more than this clear, however,
since the dialogue between the two persons necessarily dramatizes explicitly the implicit relationship between them. That relationship is, in human terms, tautological. What the Father speaks, the Son embodies and repeats. For example, after announcing that man will fall and be punished, God concludes, “But Mercy first and last shall brightest shine” (3.134). Here is what follows that statement:

Beyond compare the Son of God was seen  
Most glorious, in him all his Father shone  
Substantially express’d, and in his face  
Divine compassion visibly appear’d,  
Love without end, and without measure Grace,  
Which uttering thus he to his Father spake.  
O Father, gracious was that word which clos’d  
Thy sovran sentence, that Man should find grace

(Paradise Lost, 3.138–45)

To make the relationship even more clear, Milton has built Christ’s speech out of almost every device of repetition known to Renaissance rhetoric — again, for example:

For should Man finally be lost, should Man  
Thy creature late so lov’d, thy youngest Son  
Fall circumvented thus by fraud, though join’d  
With his own folly? that be from thee far,  
That far be from thee, Father, who art Judge  
Of all things made, and judgest only right.  
Or shall the Adversary thus obtain  
His end, and frustrate thine, shall he fulfil  
His malice, and thy goodness bring to naught. . .?

(Paradise Lost, 3.150–58)

The whole dialogue is formed from just such dramatization of the basic theological relationship, and I suggest that Dryden here draws upon this same relationship for his own ends. A few lines further on in this passage, Dryden makes this explicit when he has Flecknoe refer to Shadwell as a Christic anti-type of his “Old Testament” precursors:
Heywood and Shirley were but Types of thee,
Thou last great Prophet of Tautology:

(29-30)

To finish the parallel, Dryden reverts to it once more at the crucial point of the anointing of Shadwell, the climax of the coronation ceremony:

The Syre then shook the honours of his head,
And from his brows damps of oblivion shed
Full on the filial dullness . . .

(134-36)

He here alludes to a specific text in Paradise Lost:

He said, and on his Son with Rays direct
Shone full; hee all his Father full exprest
Ineffably into his face receiv'd,
And thus the filial Godhead answering spake.

(Paradise Lost, 6.719-22)

Immediately before this, God has transferred to Christ power to defeat Satan and to teach him and his followers what it means "to despise / God and Messiah his appointed King" (6.717-18).

The logical question to ask at this point is, of course, what all this means. It means, on one very simple level, the obvious charge that Flecknoe and Shadwell are tautological writers, that their plays are filled with repetitions both of themselves and of other writers — hackwork and plagiarism. And it means, equally obviously, that the relation between Flecknoe and Shadwell is tautological, that they are repetitions of each other, mirror images of dullness. But the text says that explicitly, and we certainly do not need an elaborate theological framework for the commonplaces of a literary quarrel. What all this really implies is that the relationship among Flecknoe, Shadwell, and their respective plays is totally tautological, not just literarily, but ontologically as well: the "issue of a large increase" with which Flecknoe is blessed (8) — and this includes Shadwell as well as Flecknoe's plays — is (not "is like") a
repetition of himself, just as Shadwell’s plays are “Not Copies drawn, but Issue of thy own” (160) and so repeat him — “All full of thee, and differing but in name” (162). Flecknoe explicitly counsels Shadwell about his foolish characters:

Let ’em be all by thy own model made
Of dullness, and desire no foreign aid

(157–58)

This creation in Shadwell’s own image returns us to our starting point in Genesis and completely rounds out the tautology by now casting Shadwell as God the Father.

The fundamental point of this elaborate analogy rests on the role of the Logos in creation. God creates by and through the Word: the Word is the agent and model of creation. What Flecknoe and Shadwell produce amounts to a travesty of the divine creativity. Their version of it reduces it to the all-too-human level of simple foolishness. If tautology is meaningful in God — and in orthodox Christianity it is the one meaningful act that provides the ground for all other acts — in man it is boring. God is tautological: his existence and essence are identical, as Aquinas and many others point out. He expresses himself in tautologies: in the Logos, who mirrors him; in his tautological declaration to Moses, “I am that I am”; in his creation of man in his own image. But God is tautological because there is nothing outside of himself to which he can refer; he encompasses all being and provides its ground and source. In this sense, God is a closed ontological system, just as epic is a closed linguistic system: in both, tautology is the ground of being and meaning. God creates out of this fullness of being; Flecknoe and Shadwell create out of their vacuity. Shadwell, bearing Flecknoe’s “perfect image,” “never deviates into sense” (20). His fools “stand in [his] defence, / And justifie their Author’s want of sense” (155–56); that last pentameter beautifully and pointedly parodies Milton’s “And justify the ways of God to men.” There is no distinction between them and their creations, just as there can be no distinction between them as persons. Here, of course,
lies the total difference between their creativity and God's: his creation is really distinct from him, just as the Son is really distinct from the Father. The divine tautology results in infinite variety, the human one in mere repetition. God unites three in one, but Flecknoe and Shadwell repeat one in two.

Theologically and literarily, in Genesis and in epic, the word bridges the gap between human and divine, between material and spiritual, and herein lies the enormity of what Flecknoe and Shadwell do. They reverse that process and use the word to divide, to subtract soul from body. Their creations are marked not by life but by corporeality; sheer physical bulk is their distinguishing characteristic, inertness their chief glory: Flecknoe calls Shadwell "A Tun of Man" (195); "his goodly Fabrick fills the eye" (25); "loads of Sh---almost choakt the way" (103). Appropriately, Dryden depicts this by means of an essentially blighted sexuality and ubiquitous scatology. Shadwell's throne is erected on the scene "of lewd loves, and of polluted joys" (71); he early practiced the lore of Love's Kingdom (124); Psyche sprung from his loins (125) — surely an unlikely source for Psyche. Even "his Sceptre and his rule of Sway" (123) priapically and perhaps autoerotically comments on the sterile bawdry of his plays. Flecknoe offers to teach him "Pangs without birth, and fruitless Industry" (148), a lesson he seems not to need, since he begins the poem "big with Hymn" (41) and ends it still flatulent and swollen, a "mountain belly" with "a tympany of sense" (193–94) — certainly the longest false pregnancy in literature. I presume it is only academic squeamishness that has prevented someone from pointing out that Dryden's consistent use of "Sh---" frequently demands, despite the meter, a monosyllabic reading. I doubt that when the echoes call from "Pissing-Ally" (47) it is "Shadwell" they are saying. Surely, after we have been told that "neglected Authors" are "Martyrs of Pies, and Reliques of the Bum" (100–101), we must read "Loads of Sh---" (103) scatologically. And it seems to me equally clear that the "double portion of his Father's Art" (217) that Shadwell inherits shares this same taint. At any rate, all of this exactly defines the nature of Flecknoe's and Shadwell's art. Quintessentially material, it represents the overflow of life and energy only in the most grossly parodic sense; it is formed from
the remnants of life rather than from life itself. The metaphor is precise, and quite unanswerable.

Imagery of this sort enables Dryden to make maximum use of bodies as a debasing device, as he did in *Absalom and Achitophel*, since all flesh becomes tainted by association with its least reputable uses. This results in the poem in the pronounced emphasis upon the physical representation of what is not necessarily perceived as physical. The dwelling on Shadwell’s enormous size is straightforward and obvious enough, but Dryden continues to employ the language of physical properties when talking about what should be intellectual or artistic matters. Flecknoe warns Shadwell not to let “alien *S-dl-y* interpose, / To lard with wit thy hungry *Epsom* prose” (163–64). Sir Formal fills his dedications (169–70) just as his characters — once more tautologically — are full of him (162). Shadwell “whole *Eth’ridg* dost transfuse” (184) to his plays. His “writings lean on one side still” (191); he himself is “A Tun of Man” and “a Kilderkin of wit” (195–96). In the same way too the kingdom of letters is reified. Dryden accomplishes this in part by localizing it for the moment in London and suggesting thereby that it actually possesses physical extension. Flecknoe, with his insistent materialization of all metaphor, finishes the task:

Heavens bless my Son, from *Ireland* let him reign
To farr *Barbadoes* on the Western main:
Of his Dominion may no end be known,
And greater than his Father’s be his Throne.
Beyond loves Kingdom let him stretch his Pen.

(139–43)

Such a process as this inevitably leads to a blurring of distinctions between fictions and facts and among people, places, and plays. Flecknoe consistently fails to differentiate between his artistic and his actual (if any) progeny; and Shadwell, as we have already seen, falls somewhere in a shadowy area between the two. In this same manner, at the coronation the path of the procession is strewn with “scatter’d Limbs of mangled Poets” (99), an image that drastically reifies Horace’s already metaphorically concrete “*disjecta membra poetae*.” In the same passage, the
neglected authors who come from dusty shops, "Martyrs of Pies, and Reliques of the Bum" (100–101) are equally ambiguous: they could just as easily be books or people. The same confusion holds true when Flecknoe speaks of Shadwell's characters, who are his ambiguous issue:

Yet still thy fools shall stand in thy defence,  
And justify their Author's want of sense.  
Let 'em be all by thy own model made  
Of dullness, and desire no foreign aid:  
That they to future ages may be known,  
Not Copies drawn, but Issue of thy own.  
Nay let thy men of wit too be the same,  
All full of thee, and differing but in name.

(155–62)

In another instance of this, Sir Formal attends his pen (169–70) just as earlier in the poem Dekker foretold that his pen would bring forth "Humorists and Hypocrites . . . / Whole Raymond families, and Tribes of Bruce" (92–93). This whole process culminates, of course, in the mad science-fiction moment when the creatures slip from the creator's control, assume autonomy, and turn on their inventor:

He said, but his last words were scarcely heard,  
For Bruce and Longuil had a Trap prepar'd,  
And down they sent the yet declaiming Bard.

(211–13)

Here the artifact has achieved the same level of existence as the artist — or vice versa — and the artist pays the price for his own hack work. His inability to make clear distinctions in the realm of art produces, in the realm of being, a world that is all Love's Kingdom, populated only by Humorists, Hypocrites, and Virtuosos. Sloppy art, Dryden is arguing, effects a confusion in reality; or, put another way, since our art embodies the reality we live in, confusion in art and reality are necessary corollaries of each other. This relation between art and reality goes far beyond a simplistic mirror-to-nature conception: it is essentially the relation-
ship of the first and second persons of the Trinity, tautological, two versions of the same thing. Thus the incoherence of Flecknoe's and Shadwell's minds is the incoherence of the world they create around them, and they themselves are no more or less real than their characters Bruce or Longvil. From this point of view, MacFlecknoe is a poem as much about ontology as about literature — as indeed epic has always been.

Once again the hapless Shadwell bears the burden of this unreality. Flecknoe presents him to us as the incarnation of this tautology, as what Pope will later call the anti-Christ of wit:

Heywood and Shirley were but Types of thee,
Thou last great Prophet of Tautology:
Even I, a dunce of more renown than they,
Was sent before but to prepare thy way;
And cursly clad in Norwich Drugget came
To teach the Nations in thy greater name.
My warbling Lute, the Lute I whilom strung
When to King John of Portugal I sung,
Was but the prelude to that glorious day,
When thou on silver Thames did'st cut thy way,
With well tim'd Oars before the Royal Barge,
Swell'd with the Pride of thy Celestial charge;
And big with Hymn, Commander of an Host,
The like was ne'er in Epsom Blankets tost.

Dryden conglomerates a good many traditional motifs here, all of them pointing with greater or lesser precision to Shadwell as poet, prophet, and messiah. The reference to Heywood and Shirley as types of Shadwell, Flecknoe's description of himself as John the Baptist and his parody of the inspired harpist and poet David (another type of Christ), all force us to see Shadwell as a travesty of Christ, a reductio ad absurdum of the divine tautology. The divine Word was made flesh, and this was paradox enough for seventeen centuries of Christianity; but Dryden provides us in MacFlecknoe with paradoxes on top of that: the satire
makes Shadwell's flesh, his mode of existence, exclusively verbal, while at the same time demonstrating how he converts all words to flesh, reduces them to inert matter. Shadwell, tautological in every respect, becomes the vehicle for his own very literal incarnation of the word: he is "Swell'd with the Pride of [his] Celestial charge"; he bears the word within him, "big with Hymn." Another aspect of this confusion of literature and reality, spirit and matter, can be seen in Flecknoe's later description of Shadwell, "A Tun of Man in thy Large bulk is writ" (195), where the word once again merges into the flesh. Here, of course, we are dealing explicitly with a parody, a debasement, of the central moment of Christian history. If the Incarnation of Christ actualizes the nexus of human and divine, Shadwell's false pregnancy shatters that connection. What he produces is the complete reification, the total corporealization, of word and spirit. His flatulence parodies inspiration, and his verbal and physical constipation for the duration of the poem (Shadwell never speaks in MacFlecknoe) again quite literally embody Dryden's final judgment on the man and his works.

All of this elaborate theological paraphernalia provides the basis for the poem's mode of procedure: the playing with the theology of the Logos subverts the framework of reality and brings into being an exclusively verbal world — but a verbal world that is paradoxically trapped in matter. If God, creating through the Word, made a material world capable of rising to spirit, Shadwell through the degradation of the word creates an immaterial, verbal world that is quickly sinking into matter. In an ambivalent sense, this world possesses no reality outside the printed page. It exists as literature exists and draws its sustenance from — and only from — literature; this explains the superabundant allusions that punctuate the poem. On the other hand, literature exists in this world as only the physical reality of the printed page — "loads of Sh— almost choakt the way" (103). Such a world closes upon itself. It cannot have reference to any reality outside itself and so must be tautological. Neither can it transcend in any way the limitations of finite, physical existence: "All humane things are subject to decay" (1).

Dryden knows that to carry a joke too far is to make it very serious indeed, and he consciously carries MacFlecknoe to extremes. He
makes of tautology one of the governing structural principles of the poem, thereby illustrating in the world of *MacFlecknoe* the world of Flecknoe and Shadwell and at the same time creating the poem (and cosmos) they are incapable of. For example: Flecknoe’s second speech repeats and amplifies the characteristics of Shadwell and the motifs presented in his first speech and in the coronation episode. The two speeches in themselves constitute variations on the same theme: both consider the facts that prove that Shadwell was destined for “annointed dullness” (63). The imagery of prophets and of Flecknoe’s drujjeg robe (29–33) reappears at the end of the poem; Flecknoe’s lute and Shadwell’s music of lines 35–56 recur in lines 209–10. The emphasis on mere words, which first occurs in lines 53–59 and surfaces again in lines 83–84, the garrulous Flecknoe expands upon in lines 197–208. Characters from several of Shadwell’s plays pop up frequently throughout the poem (56–59, 75–78, 151–70, 211–13), and mention of related or rival playwrights occurs even more ubiquitously (29, 79–93, 142, 151–52, 163–64, 171–85), all within the framework of a simple dichotomy: abhor Jonson, Etherege, Sedley; follow Dekker, Heywood, Shirley, and Ogilby. Dryden packs the poem even more frequently and repetitiously with references or allusions to plays, almost all of them Shadwell’s (42, 53, 58, 62, 81, 84, 90–93, 122–25, 143, 148, 164, 179–80, 187–90, 198, 211–13). In addition to all this, Dryden amply increases the tautology and the sense of a closed, purely verbal world by a wealth of allusions, frequently repeated, to Genesis, Deuteronomy, Nehemiah, the Book of Kings, the New Testament accounts of John the Baptist, Cowley’s *Davideis, Davenant’s Gondibert*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Horace’s *Satire I.i*.v and *Ars Poetica*, Plutarch’s and Livy’s account of the founding of Rome, and Shadwell’s own Epilogue to *The Humorists*.

But Dryden has managed this material more artfully than merely by heaping up repetitions. He has carefully arranged these parts into an integral, if redundant, whole that bears a parodic relation to the symmetries of epic. The second half of the poem mirrors exactly the first. The nature that pleaded for Shadwell at the beginning reappears as the nature to which he is to trust at the end; Shadwell himself is described in exactly
the same way at beginning and end — massive, swollen, obese. His initial false pregnancy is further mirrored in the “Pangs without birth, and fruitless Industry” (148) that Flecknoe offers to teach him. The long section on Shadwell’s “want of sense” (156) simply magnifies Flecknoe’s opening remarks about Shadwell’s “full stupidity” (18). The very “action” of the poem also reflects this pattern of repetition: the first third (roughly) of the satire contains Flecknoe’s monologue about the succession to the throne and the reasons why Shadwell should inherit; the next part dramatizes, in a symbolic landscape that links Flecknoe’s two speeches and Shadwell’s virtues with their political environment, the fact of that succession and some of Shadwell’s qualifications; the final third of the poem is once again Flecknoe’s speech, this time in the genre of instructions to the prince, advising Shadwell how to do the things he has already done well enough to earn the crown. In such a framework, Shadwell logically inherits Flecknoe’s drujget robe; he is, after all, a repetition of Flecknoe. And equally logically, his last acquisition is a “double portion of his Father’s Art” (217); since that art is nothing if not tautology, a double portion is only appropriate.

MacFlecknoe superimposes a variety of structures upon each other. One of the most obvious, of course, is the tautological structure we have just been discussing, the repetitious correspondence of parts to parts, which can only be described as static — a parody of the sort of structure Dryden used in Absalom and Achitophel. In terms of this structure, the poem goes nowhere: the beginning contains the end, and nothing is changed. In other terms, the poem does progress, from the deliberations about the problem of succession through the act of succession to the young king’s assumption of his powers. This essentially linear, straightforward structure involves simply the handing on of power from one generation to another — the translatio imperii or, more exactly here, a parody of the translatio studii. But the poem’s opening aphorism sets in motion another and this time circular structure — the recurrent cycle of human mutability and decay. The process of decay is illustrated repeatedly throughout MacFlecknoe: in Flecknoe himself, who, when fate summons, must obey (2); in the ruin of the Barbican (66–69); in the quality of the plays, players, and playwrights spawned
there (74–92). The repeated contrasts between the founding of Aeneas’s city and Shadwell’s evidence once again the consistent cycle of degeneration. Even Flecknoe’s final speech, which begins by praying,

Heavens bless my Son, from Ireland let him reign
To far Barbadoes on the Western main;
Of his Dominion may no end be known,
And greater than his Father’s be his Throne,

(139–42)

ends by pathetically urging him to

Leave writing Plays, and chuse for thy command
Some peacefull Province in Acrostick Land.

(205–6)

In fact, Flecknoe’s final speech details an extended process of diminishment as Shadwell receives advice that ranges downward from

Let Virtuouso’s in five years be Writ;
Yet not one thought accuse thy toyl of wit,

(149–50)

to the creation of individual characters, to the rhetoric of his dedications, to his use of bawdry. It pauses briefly to sum up his artistic practice as promising a play and dwindling to a farce (181–82), but from that point on enumerates the steps of an even more drastic decline. Shadwell’s province shrinks to “New Humours to invent for each new Play” (187–88), and Flecknoe quickly proceeds to disqualify him from tragedy, comedy, and satire (197–202), urging him now to “chuse for thy command / Some peacefull Province in Acrostick Land” (205–6). But even this is not the end, and Flecknoe’s last suggestion, which is scarcely heard, exhorts Shadwell to become completely like him and “Set thy own Songs, and sing them to thy lute” (210). The rest, of course, is silence, the logical conclusion to that rapid declension through genres, words, and mere sounds. Fittingly, Flecknoe’s final action — if it can be
called that — brings the poem full circle: the fall that leaves Shadwell "Through all the Realms of Non-sense, absolute" (6) is a literal realiza-
tion of the poem's opening sentiment, "All humane things are subject to
decay" — decay, of course, being derived from decadere, to fall down. This combination of literalism and vulgar slapstick functions, to my
mind, as the ultimate symbol of the cosmos of Flecknoe and Shadwell: it
sums them up in the act of putting them down. Debased word realizes
itself in debased thing.

From one final perspective, nothing in the poem progresses: once we
have seen Flecknoe as Shadwell's precursor, the poem freezes. All else
becomes a repetition of that relationship. The situation remains the
same; only our point of view, shifted by allusions and references,
changes and returns. Shadwell, the obscene bearer of his own travesty
incarnation, remains exactly so until the end of the poem, and Flecknoe,
now as Aeneas, now Melchisedek, now God the Father, goes on precurs-
ing, preparing Shadwell's way, until the end of the poem. And even there
nothing changes: Shadwell is not delivered, and the precursing goes on.
Shadwell assumes Flecknoe's lute and the drugget robe that Flecknoe-
as-John-the-Baptist wore. He receives as well the double portion of his
master's art that Elias biblically bequeathed to his successor, and since
the New Testament identifies Elias with John the Baptist, all this can
only mean that Shadwell has now taken over the role of precursor for
some one — or something — that will never come. He merely repeats
Flecknoe — thus his name, MacFlecknoe — repeats the precursing,
which is, in the most succinct paradox of the poem, all that can be
expected of the "last great Prophet of Tautology."

VI

Dryden's two epics embrace both ranges of allegorical reading, public
and private, political and philosophical. But — as their similarities of
image and theme (fertility, paternity, sonship, succession, bodies, lan-
guage and its contents) should already have hinted — there is no division
in epic between politics and philosophy or between public and private
life. They are all encompassed by varying conceptions of wisdom; they
are all included in epic’s concern for right order in every sphere. MacFlecknoe’s parodic versions of the external epic action — the founding of a kingdom — and the internal — the hero’s recognition of the full dimensions of his calling and attainment of the requisite knowledge — unite them all the more firmly in order to undo them. The epic tradition as Dryden received it already included within its spacious confines a concern for philosophic truths about human life as well as for the fate of kingdoms. It embraced a private aspect that elaborated the difficulties of attaining personal tranquillity — whether that was construed as philosophic calm or Christian salvation — as well as its more obvious public interests in good order in government and the working-out of the (or a) providential design in history. That archetypal epic wanderer, Odysseus, already illustrated many of these concerns at the very beginnings of the tradition. His devotion to Athena, his long series of trials, his sustaining desire for return to his domestic comforts and for reunion with his wife, son, and father, all readily lent themselves to the most patent of interpretations as a moral journey toward personal salvation. At the same time, his reestablishment of the proper order of succession on Ithaca equally easily defined his journey as a political allegory, a Bildungsroman for princes. In the Aeneid, Anchises’ various discourses in the underworld and Aeneas’s adventures in the upper just as readily served as exempla for a whole battery of moral, metaphysical, and political truisms. And, in any event, an English poet writing after Spenser and Milton would have needed very little prompting to see that the epic form was most properly concerned with physics and metaphysics, politics and morality. If all these come, literature, as the conservator of them all, cannot be far behind. In fact a concern for literature, for the arts in general, already held a place in formal epic explicitly, as we have already seen in the Virgilian commentators, and implicitly through the analogous ideas of the transference of empire and the transference of studies. Arts followed arms, and the course of both was, along with the epic journey, ever westward. Dryden’s conception of all these concerns as not only simultaneous but as intimately and essentially related derived from the simple realization that the epic, a literary form, was the vehicle for them. Epic, in simple fact, occupied an
absolutely central cultural position as the formulator and preserver of civilization's highest knowledge and belief; it and the Bible shaped the reality men lived.

From this logically flowed the fusion of ontology and aesthetics that *MacFlecknoe* illustrates. To tamper with language, to abuse the word, must, in such a view, produce ontological consequences — consequences that are symbolically illustrated in *MacFlecknoe* when Shadwell's creatures take control. That action embodies the Renaissance's version of the results of the mad scientist's labors, the reign of the monsters. Renaissance culture differed from ours in being still basically a literary culture, and the results of world-tampering presented themselves to *it sub specie verbi*, but the vision that *MacFlecknoe* sardonically presents remains the vision of cultural annihilation we still share and in our own terms fear. At any rate, Dryden's vision of the creatures run mad, of man assimilated to, and controlled by, the forces of his own unreason, established the pattern for this type of writing from that time forward. It informed Swift's *Tale of a Tub*, which collapses into the morass of its own metaphorics, leaving its mad author to write out the contents of his own brain, nothing. It can be seen behind Gulliver's submission to the superiority of the horses, a surrender to the autonomy of a definition — *animal rationale* — that man originally made for, not against, himself. And it most assuredly inspired the fiction of the fourth book of *The Dunciad*; it is clearly visible in the apocalyptic closing scene, when Dulness reestablishes her power over the no longer animate world. This same fear of the consequences of the literary imagination misused, of art and consequently of life deformed, provided the impulse for Fielding's responding to *Pamela* first with *Shamela* and then with *Joseph Andrews*. It explains why Parson Adams must, at a crucial moment in "real" life, throw his Aeschylus into the fire, why, in *Tom Jones*, Sophia drops her sentimental romance at the entrance of Lord Fellamar, and why, in Fielding's last attempt to make epic an ontological force in human life, a pamphlet converts Captain Booth to true belief. It all ends in the futility of Walter Shandy's hopelessly irrelevant Tristrapaedia, which cannot even keep up with the life it was meant to control. *Tristram Shandy* realizes the world Dryden feared, though it decks it
with a brilliance he would never have guessed it capable of. The disjunctive punning, the bawdry held in check only by the pervasive impotence of the characters, the dissolution of knowledge into mere words in Walter’s theory of the auxiliary verb, the collapse of the whole world of the novel into a cock-and-bull story — “and one of the best of its kind, I ever heard” — all these demonstrate the radical dissociation of literature from the framework of ideas in which Dryden conceived *MacFlecknoe*. Sterne accepts as goods — or at least as facts — the things that Dryden rejected in advance. Neoclassical literature polarizes neatly around these two points — at one, concern for the establishment of a cosmos, for order, for society; at the other, an attempt to write a knowing self into existence. Somewhere between these two points, Shadwell, with Colley Cibber as midwife, had given birth to the “modern sensibility.” The continuity that epic sought between art and reality had been established, but the price of the establishment was the death of the world that spawned epic, the world that made clear distinctions between matter and spirit while it saw clear connections between them. Just as epic’s allegory tended to replace epic’s action, the success of epic’s linkings destroyed the reality of its distinctions.

3. The implicit image of the scattering of seed the rest of the poem capitalizes upon by linking it with the parable (Matthew 13:1–12) as in lines 194–95.
4. See the Epistle to the Romans, 5:12–21.
5. See Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies* (Princeton, N.J., 1957). Kantorowicz’s contention that the doctrine of the king’s two bodies developed out of the theology of the mystical body of Christ seems to me to have genuine relevance to Dryden’s poem.
6. See especially Sir Robert Filmer’s *Patriarcha*, ed. Peter Laslett (Oxford, 1949), pp. 57–60 and 74–78. *Patriarcha* was published in 1680 after circulating in manuscript for many years; obviously it was brought out as a document in support of the royalist cause.
7. See Filmer, *Patriarcha*, pp. 81–82. It is also worth pointing out, as Filmer does, that the seventeenth century believed that the duty of obedience to magistrates and kings was biblically enjoined by the fourth commandment, “Honor thy father and thy mother.”


14. The phrase is Curtius’s, p. 443.

15. The phrase is Terence McVeigh’s. I have throughout my discussion of Fulgentius’s commentary availed myself of the language of his translation in “The Allegory of the Poets: A Study of Classical Tradition in Medieval Interpretation of Virgil” (Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 1964).


17. Fulgentius 12, McVeigh, p. 209.

18. McVeigh’s discussion of Fulgentius’s allegoresis makes this point also.


20. McVeigh, pp. 142 ff., discusses some of the similarities between Fulgentius and Bernardus.

21. The text used is *Commentum Bernardi Silvestris super sex libros Eneidos Virgilii*. Nunc primum edidit Guilielmes Reidel. Gryphiswaldae, typis Iulli Abel, MDCCCCXXIV. Since the completion of this study, two important works dealing with Bernardus have appeared whose findings I was unfortunately unable to incorporate into this book; they are Brian Stock’s *Myth and Science in the Twelfth Century* (Princeton, N.J., 1972) and Winthrop Wetherbee’s *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century* (Princeton, N.J., 1972).

22. Compare, for example, *The Sphere of Sacrobosco*, ed. and trans. Lynn Thorndike (Chicago, 1949), p. 123: “Be it understood that the ‘first movement’ means the movement of the *primum mobile*, that is, of the ninth sphere or last heaven, which movement is from east through west back to east again, which is also called ‘rational motion’ from resemblance to the rational motion in the microcosm, that is, in man, when thought goes from the Creator through creatures to the Creator and there rests.”

23. The only modern edition of Landino’s allegorization is the edition and translation of the second two books of the *Disputationes Camaldulenses* by Thomas H. Stahel,

An Italian edition of Virgil’s works, first printed in 1576 and republished many times thereafter up until at least 1710, served as an important means of disseminating, with elaborations, Landino’s allegorization of the *Aeneid*. See *L’opere di Virgilio Mantovano, commentate . . . da Fabrini, Malatesta, e Venuti*.

24. The terms *executive* and *deliberative* are borrowed (and slightly altered) from Thomas M. Greene’s important work *The Descent from Heaven: A Study in Epic Continuity* (New Haven, Conn., and London, 1963).

25. Ibid., p. 407. This process of internalization has also to do, of course, with the identification of beatitude (variously defined) as the end of epic poetry: see John M. Steadman’s important and illuminating “Felicity and End in Renaissance Epic and Ethics,” *JHI* 23 (1962): 117–32.


27. See Chambers, “Absalom and Achitophel.”

28. The persistence of this structure will be discussed more fully below, in connection with *The Rape of the Lock*.


32. See Plutarch’s *Life of Romulus* for the full account (cap. 9–10) and Livy, 1.7.

33. Aubrey L. Williams, in his important book *Pope’s Dunciad: A Study of Its Meaning* (New Haven, Conn., and London, 1955), has established the importance to epic and mock epic of the action of founding (or refounding) an empire and the related concepts of *translatio imperii* and *translatio studii*; see especially pp. 44–48.

34. Earl Miner, in *Dryden’s Poetry* (Bloomington, Ind., and London, 1967), has already pointed out this similarity. I want to acknowledge here that my argument about *MacFlecknoe* resembles and draws upon Miner’s in several particulars, though we are ultimately working in different directions.

35. This seems designed as an obscene parody of the emergence of Athena, goddess of wisdom, from the head of Zeus.

36. Johnson’s dictionary, as Kinsley’s note on this line relates, defines *tympany* as “A kind of obstructed flatulence that swells the body like a drum.” In this context, Shadwell’s mountain belly may well recall Horace’s line about inept poets from the *Ars Poetica*, “parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus” (139).
37. Satire 1.4.62. The general context of this poem, a defense of satire and particular satiric examples, is relevant to *MacFlecknoe*; it may relate to Dryden's allusion to Shadwell's Epilogue to *The Humorists*, which is, among other things, a defense of general, as opposed to particular, satire. Here, of course, the allusion points out the manglings that true poets suffer in the hacks' plagiarisms.

38. It should be pointed out that Dryden has Flecknoe very carefully differentiate properly ordered art from the work of Shadwell by precisely the principle of distinction that the royal dunce violates. Etherege makes "Dorimant betray, and Loveit rage" (152); he controls them rather than they him. His fools "in their folly shew the Writers wit" (154); they do not reproduce his fatuity.

